

Extra Chapters

Conspiracy I

"In its infancy, the Fifteenth was in the awkward position of being within spitting distance of the heart of the Empire without being part of it. Legate Juniper, ever brutally sardonic, pointed out that give how tall their manors stood, they had a better chance of landing the spit on us than us on them. History wasted no time in proving her correct."

– Extract from the personal memoirs of Lady Aisha Bishara

Hakram had learned the move from the battlemaster for the Howling Wolves when he was nine years old. Catch the enemy's wrist with your hand, leveraging greater muscles, and on the other side slap your open palm on the human's ear. The wheat-eaters were known to be delicate in the head, by the standards of the Clans. There was a pop as the dark-skinned man's eardrums burst: the pain stopped him for a moment. The adjutant snarled, lunging forward and sinking his teeth in the exposed throat. Long fangs buried in soft flesh, ripping through veins and arteries as he shook his head out. The stranger twitched, blood spraying everywhere and coating Hakram's face with pleasant warmth, then dropped. Eyes perfectly calm, he looked for the other man who'd tried to accost them but found Aisha had already taken care of it: she'd buried a knife to hilt through the Soninke's eye. With measured elegance she slid out the knife, flicking away some kind of transparent fluid. Robber popped out of the side-alley a moment later, shaking his head.

"There were only two," the yellow-eyed tribune said, face unusually serious.

It seemed even Robber took attempts to kill them seriously, on occasion. Swallowing the last of the meat, Hakram cleared his chops of the gore with a rough tongue. Good thing no other orc was around, it was considered a pretty suggestive movement where he was from – but then the Howling Wolves kept to many of the traditions from the Lesser Steppes, for all that they lived in the heart of the Northern ones. An unbroken line of shamans and blood-witches going back to the Golden Age had done much to keep the old ways alive.

"You were the target," Aisha decided, addressing him nonchalantly as she riffled through her corpse's clothes. "Mine spent half the fight trying to get at you."

Hakram almost chuckled. Aisha might call that little rumble a fight, but what he'd seen of her part of it had looked more like a cold-blooded execution. The Hellhound's second had not hesitated so much as heartbeat before putting down her opponent, not that this surprised him. Taghreb were not a merciful people and their nobility had only gotten where it was by being terrifyingly nastier than all other comers. Not even the orcs had ventured in the Hungering Sands, back in the days of their power. The only people to have mastered the desert tribes were the Miezens, and hadn't they mastered the whole world?

"Can't blame them, my boy Hakram is a handsome bastard," Robber added thoughtfully. "More bastard than handsome, in truth, but he only has so much to work with."

"Your moral support humbles me," the adjutant replied mildly, then returned his attention to the olive-skinned aristocrat. "If they had a target, this wasn't two locals trying to shake up soldiers after pay-day."

Aisha raised a condescending eyebrow at him. She'd yet to manage to shake herself of that habit, not that Juniper had done anything to help. The Hellhound apparently found the sight of humans sneering at other humans amusing.

"This was an assassination attempt, Hakram," the aristocrat said. "There's no use trying to pretend otherwise."

The tall orc had arrived at the same conclusion, actually, be he disliked hurrying to judgement. In a city like Ater, acting too quickly was a dangerous thing. The Fifteenth was camped half a day away from the scheming heart of the Empire and this was far from the first time they'd been probed by unknown forces. Had Lord Black not still been in the capital, he imagined it would have been much worse – the Empress' right hand cast a long shadow, and few were willing to risk the man's ire by attacking his pupil directly. Until today, it seemed. Hakram would not delude himself into thinking he'd achieved enough as an individual to rank an assassination attempt: it was his function in the Fifteenth Legion that merited killing.

"The Boss is going to be in a *mood* when she hears about this," Robber said delightedly.

Aisha frowned at the comment, then rose to her feet. "No personal effects," she said. "He does have a tattoo between his shoulder blades, though."

The Staff Tribune had thoughtfully flipped the corpse over for them to look at. Hakram knelt by the dead human and peered at the inked skin. Some kind of bird picking at a corpse. He cast a look at Aisha, silently asking for information.

"A buzzard, I think," she said. "Associated with Aksum in Soninke heraldry but I've never seen this symbol before."

That didn't mean much. The Dread Empire wasn't as bad as Callow or Procer, where everybody and their goat had a sigil, but the Wasteland bred ancient conspiracies the way the West whelped chivalric orders and every single one of them had some sort of meaningful secret sign. Tyrants stamped them out whenever they came in the open, but for every one out in the sun there were a dozen meeting in crypts. Ignoring Robber – never a good idea, that – Aisha met his eyes squarely. Unusual. Taghreb and Soninke both avoided doing that whenever they could. Demons and devils taking human shape could use eye contact to steal your soul, as could some Warlocks. Aisha was being serious about whatever she would say next.

"We can't tell Lady Squire," the Staff Tribune said.

Robber burst out laughing. "Boy, did you pick the wrong crowd to try to float that."

The goblin tribune wasn't wrong. Inside the unofficial 'Squire faction' of the Fifteenth, both he and Robber were prominent members. Nauk was the only one more outspoken about his allegiances: the other orc had decided that Cat was the warlord of their generation, and as far as he was considered that settled the matter. Every matter, really. Good orcs did not question their warlord, though they ripped out the guts of anyone who did. *And yet*. Hakram did not believe in unthinking service. Blind obedience had been the death of many a villain. Aisha Bishara was an aristocrat to the bone, but that did not make her the enemy. The Fifteenth would come to tally on her ability to navigate the treacherous waters of Tower politics in the coming years, he suspected.

"Why?" he asked.

Aisha straightened, her face smoothing out in a pleasant mask. The apparent charms of her appearance – that Ratface still couldn't shut up about, when he got into his cups – were thankfully lost on Hakram. Humans were like ugly hairy two-legged cows. Unlike orcs they got hair on every part of their bodies instead of just the top of the head. Why the males got beards and moustaches when the females didn't was just one of those mysteries of biology: he suspected whatever Gods had created humans had not been sober at the time.

"You're her favourite, Hakram," Tribune Bishara stated.

It was not a question and he did not deny it. Exactly what Cat saw in him he wasn't sure, but he liked her enough he didn't care to question the bond.

"If Lady Squire hears there was an attempt on your life, she'll be kicking down every door in Ater until she gets to hang whoever she deems responsible."

"It'll be fun," Robber grinned. "Been millennia since there was a proper greenskin raid on the capital."

That's her whole point, Robber, Hakram understood as he remained silent. Even the goblin had unconsciously realized that Praesi soldiers would balk at entering the streets of Ater in full gear to exact retribution. The Callowan recruits were still an unknown quantity but they might see the whole affair as a way to wiggle out of service to the Legions. Too many risks involved.

"Her response could be more measured than that," he pointed out.

People who underestimated Catherine Foundling had this nasty habit of eating dust.

"It won't be," Aisha said confidently. "You didn't see her in the Tower, when one of Heiress' minions provoked her. She broke that girl's finger without hesitating and then paid for it. The Fifteenth's too young, we can't afford to make the kind of enemies a heavy-handed retaliation would earn us."

"We're not without protection ourselves," the orc said.

Aisha shook her head. "We can't get the Black Knight involved. Relying on his protection every time we have a problem just makes us a liability. We need to start dealing with these kind of messes ourselves, Hakram. Quickly, quietly, cleanly."

She wasn't wrong, he decided. The orc was not sanguine at the idea of involving the most famous of the Calamities in their business, in all honesty. Cat seemed strangely fond of the man but Hakram considered him a considerable danger nonetheless. He wasn't willing to hide any of this from Squire, but neither was it necessary to send a runner to her the moment things got complicated. Taking care of issues like this fell under his function as adjutant, in fact if not in name. He took a moment to consider the possible consequences, ignoring the way impatience flickered in Aisha's eyes, then made his final decision.

"Agreed," he said.

"Hakram," Robber broke in, looking startled, "you can't possibly-"

"We hang a dozen nobles and the entire court will be out for blood," the orc replied. "It might become enough of a mess we won't get deployed."

Deployed where, he did not yet know. Cat was playing that one close to the chest, but she'd made no secret of how urgent getting the Fifteenth in fighting shape was. That much was common knowledge among all the high-ranked officers of the legion.

"We still need a lead," Robber conceded grumpily.

"I have a cousin who may know something," Aisha offered.

The same one who ran the Sword and Cup, if Hakram had to guess. Clever of the Staff Tribune to turn a family-owned property into the unofficial watering hole of her legion, but Hakram disliked the idea of getting too many unknowns involved.

"We're keeping this in-house. We already have a man, if we need a guide in the underbelly of Ater," he said.

Aisha grimaced and Robber cackled.

"Let's go visit Ratface, then," the goblin grinned.

Hakram waited until they'd left the alley ahead of him to lean over the closest corpse and pluck out the eyeballs, popping one into his mouth. No use wasting good meat, and it looked like he wouldn't be getting dinner.

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Aisha knew where Hasan – Ratface, as the others still called him – was. He'd already been a regular at the Burnished Swan when she'd first become involved with him, long before other cadets had taken to drinking. It had been part of what had made him attractive at the time, the way he seemed to have *lived*, strayed outside the confines of cadet routine and the War College. She should have known that no one took up frequenting dives like this unless there was already something wrong in their life, and the list of Hasan's issues would cover several small books. Their parting had been amicable, though apparently surprising to him, but having been the one to distance herself she disliked the idea of asking for his help now. She'd let Hakram do the talking, if she could: owing the other Taghreb a favour was not something she desired to happen any time soon. Robber, the irritating pest, seemed to smell her discomfort.

"A romantic reunion, eh?" he leered. "Careful not to swoon too hard, the floors look dirty."

Weakness is a goblin's meal, the saying went. Give this one an inch and soon he'd be chewing your bones.

"I will have you drowned in a latrine pit," she replied in Taghrebi, smiling invitingly at him.

Hakram snorted. The goblin was, at least, correct about the floors. The Burnished Swan was in dire need of a mop and a handful of stray dogs were digging at scraps the patrons occasionally threw them. The parlour was full of bange smoke and the heavy smell of poppy pipes from the back where hard men and women gambled with dice and bones over narrow tables. She ignored the few leers she got from older men and headed straight for the stairs, taking the lead. There were a handful of private rooms there and the one furthest back had been set aside for Hasan permanently. How exactly he'd managed that she was not sure, but she suspected that more than money had changed hands. She rapped her knuckles thrice against the door before pushing it open, Hakram and Robber trailing in behind.

Much like the last time she'd been here, Hasan was seated on a pile of cushions with piles of parchment and a cheap set of scales at his side. Two empty jugs of wine were to his left and a full one was currently employed in pouring himself a cup. The Supply Tribune's handsome features twisted in surprise, an unseemly display of bare emotion. He must have been rather drunk: the other Taghreb despised everything their culture stood for, but he'd not left behind the concept of losing face even in private.

"Well," Hasan spoke up, the slur in his voice barely noticeable, "this is a surprise."

"Oh Gods, he's drunk," Robber said, sounding thrilled. "Quick, Ratty, how many fingers am I holding up?"

Hasan replied to the goblin's flipping off in kind, his eyes passing over her and finally coming to rest on Hakram.

"I have a feeling I'm not going to enjoy the coming conversation," he said.

"We left two corpses in an alley," Robber contributed cheerfully.

One of these days, Aisha was going to strangle him. No tonight, unfortunately, but the time would come.

"There was an assassination attempt on Hakram," the olive-skinned aristocrat said. "We disposed of the assailants."

Hasan rubbed the bridge of his nose, then carelessly gulped down his whole cup of wine.

"Fuck," he said. "There goes my night off. Why are you three here instead of say, in camp, arming up?"

"There was a tattoo on the back of the corpses," Hakram gravelled. "A buzzard picking at a corpse."

"Marked men, it's not unusual," Hasan replied. "I reiterate, why the Hells are you three not in camp while a runner gets Foundling?"

Aisha almost frowned. The familiar way he insisted on referring to Lady Squire was quite irritating. The greenskins could be excused the poor manners, but she knew the other Taghreb had been raised better than that. Even bastards got etiquette lessons, and Hasan had been presumptive heir to his father's lordship for the better part of a decade.

"We won't be getting Lady Squire involved," she said.

Her former lover laughed. "I could swear I just heard you say no one was going to tell Catherine Foundling an assassination attempt was made on her personal adjutant," he said. "Clearly I've been drinking too much. Could someone speak again but use words that don't make me want to order a fourth jug of wine?"

Hakram cleared his throat and Aisha cast the situation an interested look. Technically speaking, Hasan was of higher rank than the orc – so was she, as a tribune-ranked member of the general staff. The hierarchy at play was muddled by the fact that technically Hakram answered directly to the Lady Squire and was deepest in her confidence. The adjutant might yield little authority in theory, but at the moment he could end a career or string a noose with a single whisper. That he'd shown remarkable restraint in the use of his influence had cemented Aisha's respect for the orc, who she'd always considered one of the most competent members of Rat Company.

"Concerns have been raised that she may retaliate in a way that burns a lot of bridges," Hakram said.

Robber mimed getting hanged to help getting the point across. Almost useful of him. Maybe she'd have him drowned in scum water instead. Hasan smiled thinly.

"I bet she will," the Supply Tribune agreed. "She'll take fire and sword to the city until she owns the hide of whoever's responsible."

He poured himself a glass, hand surprisingly steady. Perhaps not so drunk, after all. *Or just so used to drinking he's developed a talent for this*, she thought less flatteringly.

"I don't see a problem with that," he finished, sipping at his wine. "Ater could do with fewer fucking nobles. This whole Empire could."

She'd known it would come to that. Aisha felt her blood rise. For someone talented in so many clever ways, Hasan was so *horribly dim* in others. He couldn't see past his grudge against his

father, and had extended that hatred to every aristocrat in Praes. Which was punishingly narrow-minded, if he wanted to pursue a career in the Legions. A hundred times she'd told him, that he'd never be more than a career tribune if he was openly hostile to anyone with influence in the Tower. Gods Below, half the students at the War College were nobly born. Aisha smoothed out her temper, which had thankfully escaped anyone's notice. Reasoning would be of no use here. For all that, her quiver was not yet empty. Softening her face, she knelt next to the Supply Tribune.

"Please, Hasan," she asked softly, lightly touching his bare wrist. "For me. Just this once."

His hard-eyed defiance deflated almost instantly. Her met her eyes with his for half a heartbeat, just long enough not to break custom, then looked away. Aisha almost felt guilty for exploiting the fact that he was quite obviously still in love with her when she did not feel the same, but guilt weighed little on the scales compared to the consequences of failure here.

"Bish," he murmured. "Don't be like that. I'm following protocol here."

"I'm not asking you to follow the rules, I'm asking you to do what's best for the Fifteenth," she replied just as quietly.

And that was what tipped the vase over, in his mind. Hasan loved the Legions with an almost childlike purity. He'd found the family there that his blood had denied him and all his allegiances were founded on that bedrock. He would do much for her but even more for the Fifteenth.

"Fine," he finally grimaced. "I don't recognize the mark, but I know someone who will."

He rose to his feet a little unsteadily, only to be settled by the touch of her hand on his chest.

"Thank you," she said.

"Don't do that," he muttered. "I know what you're doing. I'm just fool enough to fall for it anyway."

He left them in the room, heading down the stairs. There was a moment of silence, then Robber whistled.

"That was the coldest thing I've seen all day, and Hakram just ate a guy," the goblin said.

"Part of one," the orc corrected mildly.

Aisha glared at the wretch. He'd just slid back to latrine drowning.

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So Juniper's handmaiden had just worked the harshest of wiles on poor innocent Ratface, which boded ill for the guy's love life. Robber sympathized, inasmuch as he could sympathize with anything or anyone. It wouldn't stop him from mercilessly mocking the man later, but he liked to think of that as a labour of love. The Quartermaster came back with the shadiest woman Robber had ever seen, and he was a *goblin*. Matrons basically became Matrons by proving it was possible to be even more outrageously ruthless than their predecessors, and every single female goblin who wasn't a Matron was one poisoning away from correcting that injustice. This wonder of humanity glared suspiciously at all of them, then spoke in soft aside to Ratface in some horribly garbled Taghrebi dialect.

"I trust them," the Quartermaster said, with laudably poor judgement.

"You've killed marked men," the woman said, then spat to the side. "What was the mark?"

"A buzzard tearing into a corpse," Hakram said.

The stranger looked at the adjutant like he was something a dog had thrown up on her carpet. Ah, one of *those*. Ater wasn't as bad as some of the northern cities of the Empire, but there were still quite a few people there who thought greenskins shouldn't be allowed to step foot out of their lands until they were called for. Apparently Nauk had lost his shit over something like that in Thalassina, yet another proof that the thick-headed bastard was unfit to be with Pickler in any way.

"Catacomb Children," the woman said. "Old gang, from Aksum. Used to do contract killings for the Truebloods, until Assassin had a talk with them."

By which she likely meant that they'd all been found in a warehouse dead of a string of unlikely yet simultaneous mortal accidents. Robber had always approved of the sense of humour the Calamity was rumoured to have. If you couldn't make murdering your enemies hilarious, what was even the point? Well, fun. And getting paid. But that wasn't the particular point he'd been referring to, so his argument still stood flawless and unbroken.

"And where do those naughty kids hole up, my blatantly criminal friend?" Robber asked.

"Muzzle your pet," the woman told Ratface in Taghrebi.

"That man is Tribune Robber of the Fifteenth Legion," Aisha replied sharply in the same. "Watch your tongue, if you intend to keep it."

Ah, good ol' Aisha. Might despise him, but anybody insulting a legionary was in for a rough time if she was around. Almost endearing how easy it was to wind her up. The other woman spat again, but she didn't care to get into a pissing match with someone who might as well have 'highborn' stamped on her forehead.

"Dekaram Quarter," she said. "Near the buried sewer entrance."

Robber almost whistled again. Taking a contract on a legionary was proof those boys hadn't been great thinkers, but this was spectacular confirmation. Only raging imbeciles set up shop near Ater's sewers: the whole place was crawling with giant spiders. At least half a million, by the last estimate, and they got bigger the deeper you went. They said Dread Emperor Tenebrous himself – well, herself now – was the one spawning them, having gone from thinking he was a giant spider in human skin to actually being one. Oh, those wacky humans. Second year tactics class spent a whole fortnight going over the logistics of clearing out the sewer system and the tunnels running under it, an exercise to demonstrate the concept of a victory too costly for the results achieved. Mages sworn to the Tower shad put wards over all the exits, but now and then one got out and nabbed some poor fool out in the streets at night. That these Catacomb Children had decided it was clever to base themselves close to a nigh-endless flood of death only barely bottled up promised it would be good clean fun to take them on.

"Two corpses, Fa'ir?" the criminal asked Ratface.

"In good shape, too. Where did you kill them, Aisha?"

The aristocrat looked like she was too good to frown but kind of wanted to anyway.

"Two streets east of the Sword and Cup," she replied.

Hakram looked like he'd gotten caught hiding aragh under his bunk again.

"The eyes might be missing on one," he admitted.

"Oh, was that eye-breath?" Robber asked. "Gods, you really have a problem with those."

"Nobody sells them fresh around here," the adjutant replied defensively.

The sketchy woman, who'd been about to hand Ratface seven denarii, took two back from the Quartermaster's palm. She left without bothering with goodbyes, ignoring Robber's cheerful wave.

"Hasan," Aisha said. "What does that woman trade in?"

"Don't ask questions you don't want to know the answer to," Ratface grunted, pocketing the silver.

Robber rubbed his palms together. "So this is the part where I talk to a few of my people and we have a nice chat with these Funeral Adults?"

"We all know you're getting that wrong on purpose," Hakram noted.

"Lies," the goblin tribune exclaimed. "Calumny. Possibly even a set-up."

He leaned closer to Aisha.

"You can never trust a greenskin, Bishara," he confided. "They're a shifty lot."

The noble looked like she was about to say something scathing when Ratface broke in, because he was the enemy of all forms of joy and laughter.

"You can't bring a goblin raiding party in the city, Robber," he said. "This is Ater, not Foramen. Everyone important in the city will know they're here within the hour and our targets disappear into the crowd."

The tribune scowled. He'd been looking forward to giving his boys and girls some exercise.

"There's currently two hundred legionaries on leave in the city," Aisha said.

Staff Tribune, coming to the rescue with her intimate knowledge of duty rosters.

"So we assemble a crew, then get out hands on some weapons," Robber grinned.

"And then we clean up this mess," Hakram said, baring his fangs.

Conspiracy II

"They call Ater the City of Gates and then forget to mention how often those are shut on people's fingers."

– Dread Empress Regalia II

Hakram picked up the axe.

Such a simple thing, really. A blade linked to a ring of steel at the top of a long shaft of wood. It was light, and when he tested the edge he found it was wickedly sharp. Military-grade steel, which was restricted. Either a noble had been ignoring the Empress' interdicts or a weaponsmith in Foramen was making some coin on the

side. That wouldn't last long: either the goblins or the High Lady's men would catch them if they continued. That grade of weaponry was only allowed to be made in the Imperial Forges, even if not all the stock went to the Legions. Their clever Empress now made gold out of the High Lords equipping their household troops and could gauge their numbers from the orders lodged. Would these 'Catacomb Children' be armed just as well? An hour ago the orc would have said no, but since then he'd gotten a glimpse at what went on in the streets of Ater when no one was paying attention. They were, after all, getting their weapons from civilians.

"This will do," Hakram said, idly spinning the axe like it was a child's toy.

To him it might as well have been. Heavier than a legionary's blade, but those were light as a feather to orcs. In the first days before the Conquest some of the Clans had grumbled at using glorified knives instead of their own favoured broadswords and axes, but the story was that the Carrion Lord had made his point by pitting twenty legionaries against twenty chosen warriors. The orcs had been big, hardened killers with at least twenty raids under their belts. They'd lost anyway. A hundred warriors would fight in a hundred instances of single combat. A hundred soldiers fought as a company and won the battle. The warrior societies had not liked the Black Knight's lesson but they had fallen in line. After a thousand years of defeats and death, they had smelled the scent of victory in the air. *We won't fight as soldiers tonight, though*, Hakram knew. Urban combat was not something he had much experience with, but he could take comfort in the fact that his men would be trained legionaries. The Catacomb Children were just civilians with too much blood flowing to their heads.

"I will expect prompt payment, Fa'ir," the old man said, grinning toothlessly.

"You'll have the merchandise within a fortnight," Ratface replied flatly.

Humans could be hard to read, sometimes, but from the way the Taghreb stood he was wary of the smaller old Soninke. The stranger smelled of spices and refuse, lips cracked and all his teeth missing. He was, apparently, the man to talk to if you needed weapons quickly inside Ater. Hakram had expected him to ask for coin but apparently barter was the way things worked in the streets – large amounts of gold drew Imperial attention. The city guard might have been a sordid joke but whenever Malicia sent the Sentinels away from the Tower they drowned wherever they were sent in blood. The two humans had spent half an hour bickering over amount of pounds and purity, so the tall orc suspected the 'merchandise' would be laudanum, the pain-killing brew introduced by the Miezens so long ago. Whether the Supply Tribune had been robbed or not during the trade he did not know, but from the grim look on the olive-skinned man's face he suspected it had been the case.

"Enough blades for a hundred men," the old man coughed, spittle flying as he hit his own chest. "The usual warehouse by the slaughterhouses."

The humans spoke a little longer, the Soninke twice offering tea only to be declined. He did not offer a third time, but Hakram got the impression he hadn't been supposed to. Another of those unspoken hospitality rules, he guessed. It was irksome that people expected greenskins to follow those even though nobody ever bothered to explain them. He'd picked up on a few through talking to Taghreb cadets in the College, since the desert people had been the ones to make them in the first place, but every year he unearthed fresh ones. The two officers of the Fifteenth left the spice shop through the same back door they'd used to enter it, coming out into a filth-laden alley where he could see fat rats gorging on scraps. The orc pressed his hand to his forehead at the sight of them, giving honour to the Tower – everybody knew the Empress could use carrion things as spies if she so wished. His companion smiled in amusement.

"Ratface," he said. "Those were not iron or bronze. These were goblin steel. How many weapons like this are floating around the city, that you can get a hundred in an hour?"

The Taghreb spit to the side, scattering some of the rats.

"More than you'd think," he said. "One of the quickest ways to get rich in this city is bringing in weapons, even bad ones."

"The gates are manned by the Sentinels," Hakram said. "Those can't be bought, and they look at all the carts coming in or out."

Weapons were forbidden inside the walls, for civilians anyway. Legionaries were allowed to bring knives but not swords or shields, the city guard was armed with cudgels and short swords and the noble retinues could come in armed to the teeth – if the Empress granted them permits, which she charged through the nose for. The Sentinels were armed too, of course, but no one who liked having their head on their shoulders talked too much about them.

"There's smuggler tunnels under the walls," Ratface admitted.

Hakram's hairless brow rose in disbelief. "Under the city. Where the giant spiders are."

"They don't have webs inside all the tunnels," Ratface said. "If you're lucky and fast, you can even get away with all your limbs."

The human's fingers twitched towards his hip, though he stopped himself from touching it. Either that or he had a cramp. The way the former captain had paid for his tuition at the War College had always been a subject of speculation among Rat Company. It was common knowledge among some that he'd stolen enough coin from his father to pay for his first year, but after that he'd had to pay the bursar himself. He was not on the Tower's ticket or part of the greenskin contingents, so where had he gotten the gold? Most thought he stole it, either pawning College

equipment on the sly or by rigging gambling games. Robber had started a rumour he 'sold his body to the night' that had been too juicy not to spread across their entire year but Hakram thought he might just have found the answer.

"You've done a run before," the orc said.

"Three," Ratface said. "First two set me up and on the third it became clear I'd only get lucky so many times. Got bit and had to spend most of the payment on a healer."

The spiders under the capital were poisonous, it was said. Not a surprise if they were truly being spawned by the former Dread Emperor Tenebrous. Everything that came out of the Tower was poisonous in one way or another.

"And now you handle 'merchandise'," Hakram said carefully.

The Taghreb scowled. "Do you know what would have happened, if I'd been put out of the College? My body would have been found in an alley the next morning. Too badly defaced to be recognized."

"I'm not castigating you, Ratface," the orc said calmly. "I never knew. Or even suspected."

The olive-skinned bastard sighed. "Selling the stuff is legal and most people don't ask where it comes from. I mostly deal in debt now, anyway."

Hakram refrained from pointing out how much of a stereotype that was. Sitting on most of the gold and silver deposits inside the Empire, the Taghreb were old hands at usury. Ruling nobles did not dirty their hands with matters like lending but that just meant lesser relatives handled the matters. The orc gently bumped his fist against the human's shoulder, careful not to tip him over.

"Scruples do not feed wolves," he spoke in Kharsum, quoting the old orc proverb. "Let's join up with the others. Aisha should have found us men."

Hopefully, Robber hadn't already baited her into stabbing him.

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Aisha had never stepped foot into a brothel before.

She didn't particularly approve of them, though she understood they were a necessity for the lower classes. Taghreb aristocracy did not seek the company of prostitutes: they kept paramours instead, if they were so inclined. Many nobles kept an unofficial seraglio even if they did not share a bed with the people in it – it was a sign of status and wealth to be able to keep one, especially if the members were strikingly good-looking or of good lineage. It was Dread Empress Maleficent, the Taghreb warlord who'd founded the Empire, who'd spread the practice to the

north of the Empire when she'd made hers an imperial institution. Hers had been filled with the relatives of allies and talented individual without the lineage to earn a post in the bureaucracy on their own, but on occasion it was true the seraglio had been turned into little more than a highborn brothel. Dread Emperor Nefarious had been the worst Tyrant in living memory when it came to that, but he'd paid the price for it when Malicia had poisoned and overthrown him. *As is only fitting.*

The small antechamber where she stood, staring down her nose at the 'madam', was surprisingly well-lit and clean. She'd always thought of places like this as sordid dumps where only the desperate worked. Like in most of Calernia prostitution was legal in the Dread Empire, though Praes departed from the norm in having brothels regulated by law. No such establishment could exist without a license from either the Tower of the local ruler and the illegal brothels that popped up now and then were harshly dealt with. Everyone involved in one was executed, even the patrons. This particular place was properly licensed, however, and frequented by legionaries and city guards. While not luxurious – legionary pay was good, but not *that* good – she was reluctantly impressed by how... not seedy the place was. Aisha was unfortunately too well-bred to tap her foot impatiently so she eyed the madam instead.

"They are taking too long," she said.

"Most Honoured Lady," the older woman replied, bowing her head. "Word has been given to all your soldiers. Any delay is of their own will, not mine or that of my hired hands."

She was correct. How irritating. Aisha wouldn't even be able to chide the legionaries properly when they emerged from the rooms in the back: they were off-duty and this was not an assignment that would ever be on the books. It might never be on anything at all, if Hasan did not manage to get his hands on actual weapons. She'd done well enough against one of the assassins with her knife, but when they hunted down the Catacomb Children in their lair the wretches would have more than knives themselves. The people of Ater had ignored the dictates of the Tower that they should remain unarmed for generations, somehow getting their hands on everything from crossbows to longswords even though weapon smuggling was punished by flogging unto death. The three men and two women who'd been indulging themselves shuffled out eventually and paled when they saw who had been waiting for them. Good, they felt like they'd been caught out. That meant they were unlikely to question what they were going to be used for.

After a brief set of orders and a grudgingly polite nod to the madam, Aisha took the five legionaries to the warehouse Hasan had told them they could use. It reeked of guts and meat salted so it would not go bad, and she'd had to refrain from having one of the crates that cluttered it open more than once. With that last group they'd managed to assemble a little above eighty of the two hundred

legionaries who'd been on leave in Ater. They'd have to do with this, as the rest could not be found unless they were going to spend all night on the matter. Five hundred thousand people lived inside the walls of the Empire's capital, the city itself one of the largest on the continent. It was still not fully occupied: perhaps a third of the total grounds were left in ruin, left to the mercy of beggars and criminals or the occasional petty mage. Dekaram Quarter was part of that ugly wasteland, and their enemy lay inside of it. None of the legionaries in the warehouse dared to talk louder than a murmur, which made it all the more surprising when Robber popped out behind her.

"Got another five, I see," he grinned, crouched on top of a crate to her side.

There were few lamps inside and he was hidden by shadows, not that it would have mattered to a goblin.

"This is as much as we'll manage," she said, keeping her face blank.

"Probably," he shrugged. "I hear those were in a brothel, though. That must have been fun for you. Humans and their little quirks, huh?"

Aisha's cheeks flushed with anger. He was being intolerably smug and she couldn't even throw the failings of his own people back in his face. Goblins did not have brothels, or relationships the way humans and orcs had them for that matter. Breeding for the Tribes was a regulated affair planned by Matrons. Their kind did not have an equivalent of marriage – the only bloodline that mattered was the mother's and males were chosen for breeding either for their own physical traits or because of their relation to another female. For goblins sex had little to do with romance, and a woman could birth the children of half a dozen males while considered to be involved with one she'd never shared a bed with. While goblins as a whole were hard to land a blow on Robber, little bastard that he was, did have his weaknesses.

"We do have our foibles, I must admit. Speaking of those, how *is* Senior Sapper Pickler?" she smiled sweetly, smoothing away the flush from her face.

The goblin did not flinch, but his pupils contracted to a point. She'd drawn blood.

"Ratface and Hakram should be here in a moment," he said as if he hadn't heard the question.

He scuttled away after that, to Aisha's satisfaction. Pickler's disinterest in getting involved with the two greenskins who fancied her was common knowledge among War College graduates. The Senior Sapper had the right of it, she felt. Robber was disqualified as a paramour by legion regulations anyhow, since as a sapper he fell under Pickler's nominal authority. Legionaries could not become involved with anyone in their direct chain of command, and even for those who managed that there were fairly restrictive rules. Pregnancies while in a term of service were

forbidden unless a special permission was obtained and those were exceedingly rare. Legionaries who got another legionary pregnant or became pregnant themselves were unceremoniously drummed out of the army. Should a legionary be made pregnant by a civilian, that civilian's property would be confiscated in equivalent value for the pay the legionary would have incurred in their total term of service. Herbs were provided by company healers to avoid all of this, of course, making both men and women temporarily infertile. But those were not foolproof methods and it was a rare legion who did not have its little scandals. Aisha took the time to mingle with the legionaries before she picked out her own weapon from the stacks that had been provided.

Curiosity and restlessness were running high. Humans made up perhaps a third of the force and she concentrated on those, politely stressing that this entire affair was to be kept under wraps even after it was done. As Staff Tribune she was responsible for all personnel assignment, which lent her just enough clout to get away with it. The greenskins she would leave to Robber and Hakram – they were respected enough by their people that the soldiers would fall in line without any trouble. She would have preferred to have more humans involved, but the list of people who could be both reached and trusted to keep their mouths shut was fairly limited. Greenskins were not less intriguing in nature – goblins in particular – but their own alternative loyalties would rarely see them band with enemies of the Fifteenth. Eventually she found a scimitar in the stack and gracefully slid it into her belt. Their forces had been gathered, she thought. Now all that was left was the killing.

As her people said: *Creation was begat of blood, and to blood it inevitably returns.*

—

Robber had never been part of a raiding party before.

The Tribes had cut down on those since the Conquest and he'd been from a mining tribe anyway: those were too important to be bothered too much. The Rock Breakers had been feuding on and off with the Dawnstones for seventeen generations but there was no real heat to it. Mostly their Matrons fucked each other over at every opportunity. Most males from the underground tribes lived and died without ever seeing the surface, toiling in the tunnels that ran through the upper reaches of the Grey Eyries. There were better veins deeper, sure, but there was also the risk of running into dwarvish mines down there. The idea of crawling in darkness until he died of fumes or a ceiling collapse had been what drove him to leave his tribe, claiming a one of the seats in the College they'd been due that year. He hadn't been the only young goblin trying to get an out: three seats were available but there had been four dozen males trying to claim a place. His grandmother had been third daughter to a Matron's daughter, which had seen him put directly into the ten seriously being considered.

After that he'd had to get his hands bloody.

The first boy he'd drawn into an honour duel and opened his head with a loose stone. The others had been too wary of him after that for a repeat performance to occur. Most of them had better blood than him anyhow: Matron lineages were larger and hardier than other goblins. The second boy he'd pushed down a mine shaft when no one was looking, and that was when the rest started seeing him as a real threat. He'd almost died when the candidate just above him dropped a venomous snake in his bedding but he'd replied by throwing a sack full of badgers into the alcove where he lived. The ensuing chaos had seen the entire family shamed in the eyes of their Matron and their too-clever son immediately disqualified. All the while the older women of the tribe, the matron-attendants, had watched his struggles and grinned. Fearless they said, and patted him on the back. Fearless and vicious as a male should be. *And headed for an early death*, they did not say. He heard it anyway. Before that it had never occurred to him that he might be a thing, a petty bauble toyed with for the amusement of his betters.

That was why instead of continuing to slaughter the opposition he'd called for them to sit together and talk it out. The others were wary but he'd earned enough respect through his ruthlessness that they were willing to listen. None would surrender their claim, so in the end they settled the matter by playing knuckle bones. Naturally, every single one of them had tried to cheat. Robber had not won the first round, but he'd come in second after slipping in a heavier bone so that a better player would misjudge the throw. The losers withdrew their claims but he'd almost not gone to the College anyway: the matron-attendants had wanted blood, to thin out the weakness in the tribe, and to have been denied this saw them displeased. So Robber sat in front of nine and nine old crones, the lessers and the highers, and for the first time in his life he'd grinned back. Because he was *free* now. Because the moment he'd realized that there was no difference between a death in the dark tunnels two decades from now or a death at their wrinkled hands just now, they had lost their leash.

It was the Matron who decided it. She walked into the cave, took one look at him and spat. *You scheming old witches, can't you see he's heard the wind?* she'd said. *You're the Tower's now, boy. Go die in a gutter for the Empress.* And so at seven years old they'd sent him to Ater and the War College, to learn the trade of war. Which had somehow led him to this moment, stalking his way up a collapsed wall in Dekaram Quarter. The Catacomb Children had not posted guards, filthy amateurs that they were. They'd claimed a mostly standing barracks as their lair, scrawling a buzzard in rotting old blood next to the entrance. There was light inside and the sound of people talking. Hakram had wanted to know numbers before they assaulted the place, so now Robber and three other goblins were scuttling up the ruined wall to a rooftop. The alley separating it from the barracks was narrow, jumping distance for a goblin.

"If they have a mage, there could be an alarm ward surrounding the place," Captain Borer said.

Good ol' Borer the Boring. The Deep Pit boy wouldn't get a sense of humour even if he was bit by a sarcasm werewolf. Which, if not a thing, definitely should be. Given the kind of stuff Tyrants got up to in the Tower, it was only a matter of time anyway.

"We haven't got a mage good enough to disarm one anyway," Lieutenant Rattler murmured.

Robber hissed them into silence, even the lone legionary who hadn't actually spoken.

"If they were clever enough for a ward they wouldn't have tried to kill one of us in the first place," he said.

Probably true. If it wasn't, he'd have Borer write himself up for poor advice-giving. Having Aisha deal with those little discipline reports – which always ended up on her desk, he made sure of that – was one of his small pleasures in life. Rising into a crouch the yellow-eyed tribune broke into a run and leapt over the alley, landing in a roll on top of the barracks. He paused for a moment, waiting for an alarm to ring or the gang members to cotton on to his presence. Nothing. He gestured for the others to follow as he crossed to the other side of the roof. There was a trapdoor to go inside the barracks proper and a whole corner of the roof reeked of piss. Leaning over the edge the tribune saw there was a window allowing a peek into the barracks near ground level, noise and laughter coming out of it. Definitely more than twenty people in there, which had been Ratface's lower end estimate for how many Catacomb Children there could be. The other goblins made the leap one after the other, joining him at the edge.

"Who will be jumping down to have a look?" Borer asked.

"Captain," Robber asked, deeply offended. "Jumping? Like an *animal*? No. Goblin engineering will provide. Minions, undertake the great ladder formation."

There was a heartbeat, then the only goblin not an officer leaned closer to Rattler.

"I told you he's crazy, ma'am," the sapper whispered. "I heard he keeps a jar full of eyeballs."

Rattler cocked her head to the side, ignoring him. "Ladder, as in..."

Robber grinned. Borer looked like someone had stepped on his foot but he was too polite to complain about it. Moments later the tribune was hanging upside down with his head peeking out the window, his feet in the hands of Rattler, who herself was being held up by the other two. Stroking his chin thoughtfully, Robber took a look through the ratty wooden shutters and counted at least three dozen Soninke

sitting around what had once been a common room, drinking and playing cards. There was a door leading to another room with light and sound also coming out of it. Tapping Rattler's arm quietly, he signaled for the others to hoist him back up. Hakram needed his report, and Robber needed to stab something pretty badly. It had been, like, *weeks*.

—

There was no door, just an ugly red curtain.

It reeked. This whole place did. Not that it would for long: blood was pungent enough a smell it would cover the worst of it. Hakram strode in at a swift but steady pace, the twenty or so orcs they'd assembled following him in as the tip of the spear. It took a good five heartbeats before anyone even noticed he was inside and cries of alarm rang out in Mtethwa. Too late for the pretty young man standing with his back to the orc: the adjutant buried the ax blade in the human's neck, cutting through the bones and spraying blood everywhere. Casually, he ripped it out.

"Prisoners," he reminded his warriors. "Anyone who looks important."

He got howls in answer as the orcs barreled into the room, falling onto the Children still scrambling for weapons. An older man came for him, this one scarred ritually across the face and with a golden ring in his nose. The tall orc huffed out a laugh, catching the man's wrist with his hand and crushing the bones. The human screamed in pain and dropped the notched blade he'd been grasping. A kick sent him sprawling to the ground and the axe opened his throat with a measuring swing. Like slaughtering cattle. A lot of cattle, however: more Catacomb Children were pouring into the room from a corridor. His orcs had cleared a space, though, and now humans and goblins were reinforcing them. Hakram could see the other greenskins were enjoying themselves, sinking into the battle-joy, and he howled a warning to keep them focused on the there and now. They needed answers, and corpses would not give those. His own head was clear. It always was, when the blades came out. Oh, he knew anger now. Catherine had granted him that gift, to know burning in his veins and the all-consuming desire to crush his enemies and see them driven before him. But these poor fools were just tools, and there was no glory in putting them down. It was just work, like raising a palisade or marching a drill.

Aisha caught up to him, her scimitar bloodied, and took his left. A moment later Ratface fell onto his right – his ironically chosen bastard sword still unmarred. Hakram bared his fangs and the officers of the Fifteenth strode into the thickest knot of enemies. The Catacomb Children were untrained but not inexperienced: if anything, they were probably better at this kind of close quarters fighting than his own lot. They died anyway. Hakram slapped a big man on the side of the neck, sending him sprawling to the right where Ratface ran him through. Aisha ducked under another man's swing and cut through his tendons, allowing the orc to step

on his neck to end that struggle with a sharp crack. On all fronts the gangers were being pushed back, and with only a handful of casualties on their side so far. The first real challenge of the night came when a middle-aged Soninke even taller than Hakram and morbidly fat stepped up, barbed wire wrapped around his gauntleted hands. *Fat means he's important*, the orc thought. So did the golden teeth in the man's mouth replacing the ones he'd lost.

"Mine," he told his comrades and strode forward, idly dropping his axe.

The Catacomb Children moved back like a tide, the fighting ebbing away as all eyes turned on the two of them. Single combat, then. How traditional of them.

"I am the Great Buzzard," the Soninke thundered. "Fight me and die."

"You're meat," Hakram replied. "And this ends with you kneeling."

Shouts from both sides drowned out the room as space was cleared in a rough circle for them. The Buzzard's eyes turned black and spat out a mouthful of dark smoke before dashing forward at a speed that put lie to his size. The orc calmly stepped to the side, letting him pass and pivoting to continue facing his opponent. The Soninke snarled and took a swing – Hakram, harking back to his old lessons, slapped away the wrist with his open palm. It wasn't enough. The barbed wires drew blood on his cheek, barely missing his eye. Whatever magery the man was using, it was making him faster and stronger than was natural.

"You're headed for the catacombs, fanger," the Buzzard sneered. "Creation belongs to the true blood."

He charged again and Hakram was done with probing. Squaring his stance he lowered his shoulder to the height of the man's chest as he avoided a barbed jab, taking the impact with a grunt. His feet were driven back a few inches but he remained standing. Letting out a howl, the orc flexed his muscles and flipped the fat man on his back.

"Through tall grass, come winter sun," he recited in Kharsum.

The Buzzard screamed, veins popping out and darkening, and vaulted to his feet. His swings were wild now, though almost blindingly fast. Hakram gave ground carefully, then took a single step forward. His closed fist smashed the Soninke's jaw, sending golden teeth flying.

"Stand in our bones, coated in frost," he said.

Another scream, this one more animal than man. The Buzzard's eyes looked more like obsidian than flesh now. The beat of the old hymn was a pace, an exercise children of the Howling Wolves were taught. The warrior-poets of olden days had gone into battle weaving verses as skillfully as they wove death, though the

practice was long lost. Now all that remained was a handful of hymns, the remnant of remnant. The obese Soninke spat a mouthful of steaming black goo but Hakram kept circling around him, ducking under the blow that followed and burrowing his fist in the man's belly.

"Where we were kings, by war undone," he sang.

Behind him orcs stamped their feet with the meter, like a thunderclap following the ancient words. The Buzzard's fist took him in the shoulder, shredding through his tunic and the flesh beneath, but Hakram ignored the flaring pain and lunged forward, fangs sinking into the man's shoulder and ripping out a chunk of flesh. The Soninke let out a demented laughing scream, tearing him off and throwing him away. The orc landed in a half crouch, spitting out the flesh. If killing had been his objective he could have ended the fight there by going for the jugular.

"To behold the world that we have lost," he said.

Eighty feet struck the ground in his wake, even goblins and humans joining in now. The Catacomb Children looked uneasy, perhaps thinking the hymn was a curse of some kind spoken in a foreign tongue. *Not so foreign*, Hakram thought. *The Clans knew these lands, once, when Warlords led us south in great warbands and Creation flinched at the sight of us.* It was time to finish this. He'd taken the measure of his opponent, and knew his movements. After that, everything else was just acting out his mind's intent. For the first time, the orc went on the offensive. The barbed fist came for his shoulder again but he wove around and caught the elbow. Steadying his stance, he broke it with a sharp twist.

"Warmth fades, glory cannot linger," he said.

This time, there was only silence. His leg swept the Buzzard's and the man toppled to his knees. The Soninke opened his mouth but Hakram was done indulging the madman: he took the man's hair in his fist and rammed his own knee into the face repeatedly. It took three times until the Soninke fell into unconsciousness, and his face wasted no time in swelling as he dropped fully to the ground.

"All that we have left is the *hunger*," the orc finished in Kharsum, feeling his blood cool.

He changed back to Mtethwa, gaze sweeping the still-frozen criminals.

"Kneel, Catacomb Children, or be served the sword."

They knelt. A moment later Robber popped out of the corridor, idly pocketing what looked like a handful of eyeballs. Behind him a few goblins were carrying the unconscious body of a half-naked man whose torso was covered in runic tattoos.

“Good show, everyone,” the yellow-eyed tribune said. “That said, we may have a problem.”

He pointed towards where the red curtain had once hung, now trampled, and Hakram’s eyes followed. Out in the streets a full contingent of the city guard was surrounding the building.

“Weapons on the ground,” a woman’s voice called out. “Come out one by one. All of you are under arrest for murder, conspiracy and illegal weapon possession.”

There was a pause.

“If you resist, you *will* be put down.”

—

Aisha had just watched a man she thought she knew unleash the single most brutal putdown she’d ever seen and she shivered at the sight of it. Hakram was nice, mild-mannered and a bit of a gossip. And he’d methodically taken apart a giant of man with ritual enhancements while reciting some sort of orcish poetry. Like he was plucking out a bad weed. The Taghreb aristocrat was used to seeing strength and fury from greenskins but *this*? This had been calculated savagery. The other orcs were looking at him with worship in their eyes. *Gods Below*. She would never be able to look at him the same again. They had other problems on their hands now, though. The city guard was out in force, and Aisha forced her tired mind to unfold the matter. They shouldn’t be here, that much was a fact. The guards did not patrol or police the ruined part of Ater. This whole sector was considered a pressure valve for the poor and the destitute, allowed to exist without supervision until it caused noticeable trouble – at which point the Sentinels cleared it out with blades and sorcery.

And yet they were here.

They had been sent, then. By someone with enough influence or wealth to control at least a commander in the guard, which did not really narrow down the suspects. Any noble with a semblance of power could put together enough bribe or blackmail for that. No, the important part was what these guards were being *used* for. Aisha put the events in sequence, as her mother had taught her. First a shoddy assassination attempt was made on Hakram. Then select officers of the Fifteenth, understanding the necessity of taking care of the issue without Lady Squire being involved, assembled a force that could be trusted to keep quiet. They forced the submission of the Catacomb Children, but before interrogations could be made the city guard found them in possession of illegal weapons still covered in blood. A set up. A trap carefully designed to ensnare the very people in the Fifteenth who would understand how dangerous a scandal in its infancy could be.

And now whoever was behind this had the scandal Aisha had been struggling to avoid. Lady Squire's own adjutant, two members of the general staff and a tribune caught breaking one of the Tower's most harshly enforced interdicts. She'd been so busy trying to avoid the Squire making an ill-advised move she'd made one herself. If this was the Heiress' work, then the Taghreb could almost admire how elegantly crafted the plot had been. What were their options now? If they surrendered, they'd be in a gaol and the whole city would know before a bell had passed. Lady Squire *might* have enough authority to get them out of this alive, but she'd be humiliated in front of the entire court and likely censured by the Empress herself. Not even Malicia's own supporters would ever take her seriously after that. If they fought now, Aisha believed they might be able to win. But there would be noticeable losses and she would put hand to flame that on their way out of Dekaram Quarter they'd be running into a larger force of guards waiting for them. *And then we'll have killed city guards in addition to everything else.*

Not even the Black Knight's apprentice would be able to save them from the noose then.

"We can't fight them," Hakram said.

Their legionaries were milling uneasily. The Catacomb Children were still docile for now, but some of them were still holding their weapons and they were feeling the change in the wind.

"Sure we can," Robber said cheerfully. "No witnesses, no crime."

"There'll be more guards waiting for us afterwards," Hasan said tiredly. "That was the whole plan, I think."

The lovely aristocrat felt a wave of fondness for the man who'd once been her lover. Hasan had his flaws, but lack of cleverness had never been one of them.

"Ratface," Hakram said. "Do you know another way out of Dekaram Quarter? One that doesn't take us through them."

"They'll take us through the strongholds of other gangs," the other Taghreb said. "They'll fight us and block our way, either because they got a bribe or because they don't want anyone going through their territory."

And the guards would follow. All that would lead to was fighting a battle on two fronts and they would not be winning that. Not without shields and proper legionary gear.

"Are you blanket-wetters really talking *surrender*?" Robber sneered.

Hakram turned dark eyes on his friend, face serene. "Negotiation," he corrected. "Aisha, if you'll come with me?"

She would really rather not, but who else here had any experience with this sort of thing? Hasan probably knew his way around a bribe, but this was no backalley dealing. The commander of those guards was used to rubbing elbows with the nobles they were under the thumb of. Aisha handed her scimitar to the closest legionary and got her hair in order, adjusting her clothes. She followed Hakram out of the abandoned barracks with her palms up in the air to show she was unarmed. She wasn't, of course. There was still a knife up her sleeve and she fully intended to slit the throat of the person she'd be negotiating with if they were going to seek a violent end to said negotiations. Bisharas did not go quietly into oblivion. They were immediately surrounded by guards when they came out, some of them bearing manacles. Calmly, without saying a word, Aisha stared down the man who wanted her to present her hands. The Soninke gulped, then took a look at Hakram. The orc was smiling just enough to show his fangs. The guard backed away in a hurry, though the men surrounding them all had their cudgels out as they were escorted to the person in charge. Aisha rose an eyebrow when they finally stopped walking. The woman in front of them, bearing a guard commander's insignia on her mail, was pale-skinned. A *Duni*, that high in the Ater city guard? Surprising, though less unusual since Malicia had opened the Imperial bureaucracy to all sorts.

"Adjutant Hakram of the Fifteenth Legion," her orc companion introduced himself.

"Staff Tribune Aisha Bishara, of the same," she said.

The Duni frowned at them, as if offended by their manners.

"Commander Barsina, Ater city guard. Are you two the leaders of this band of criminals?"

"We are senior officers in a Legion of Terror raised by the Carrion Lord's apprentice," Aisha replied sharply.

The woman smiled unpleasantly. "You got a parchment with the Tower's seal exempting you from the weapon laws, then?"

"It was a case of self-defense," Hakram said. "However... extended the circumstances."

Aisha watched the ugly gleam of satisfaction in the woman's eyes and knew then negotiation was a waste of time. Bettering the bribe was not an option if she was also doing it because she wanted to stick it to the Legions.

"I'm sure your story will check out," Commander Barsina said. "Until then, you'll be guests in some of my nicest cells."

She frowned then, looking at their hands.

"Captain Jarad, why aren't their hands bound?" she barked.

Aisha let out a breath and considered flicking out her knife to settle the matter differently. By the way Hakram's footing was shifting, he was debating the same. What gave her pause was the way the guards on the outer perimeter were starting to kneel. A lone silhouette passed through the crowd, armed men and women parting for her with hushed whispers. The Taghreb had expected Lady Squire or perhaps an envoy of the Empress, but what she saw was a small woman. Her face was unremarkable, her robes of passable make and she stood unarmed. Perhaps the most noticeable thing about her was her ink-stained hands. Aisha stiffened. She'd never met the woman before, but she knew who she was looking at: the Carrion's Lord own shadow, one of the most successful spymistresses in living memory. *The Scribe*. Commander Barsina paled even further and bowed.

"Lady Scribe," she said. "A pleasant surprise."

The Named smiled. There was no warmth in it, or anything else. It was just flesh being moved by muscles.

"Is it, Commander?"

Barsina stood straighter, no doubt remembering she was not without friends or authority. *Oh, Commander, Aisha thought. You're misreading the people who own you if you think they'll shield you from the Webweaver's attentions.*

"My lady, I don't know what you think you know but--"

"Everything," the Scribe said. "I know everything there is to know about you, Barsina. I know the name you had before you disfigured your sister in Satus for marrying the man you wanted. I know whose horse you stole to make your way to Ater. I know the amount and provenance of every bribe you've taken since you began patrolling these streets. I know what rivals you had beaten and by who to get to the post you hold. This was allowed, because you served as a counterweight for the two commanders owned by the Truebloods. It seems, however, that you have finally folded to the pressure."

"How *dare* you," Barsina said.

"You are of no more use to us," Scribe simply said.

She had not raised her voice, or changed her intonation in any way. She stated it as a fact and the night had never before felt so cold to Aisha Bishara as it did in that moment.

"Captain Jarad," the Webweaver said, ignoring the Duni's spluttering as her eyes sought out the Soninke who'd been about to be chewed out by her earlier.

"Congratulations, you are now a commander of the Ater city guard."

The young man saluted, hands shaking.

"What is to happen to Com- former Commander Barsina?" he asked.

Scribe met his eyes.

"I know of no such individual."

A heartbeat later, an enterprising guard behind the former commander slipped a knife in the Duni's back. Aisha did not shy away from watching the woman bleed out on the ground. *Ater, o Ater*, she thought, remembering the old verse by Sheherazad, *you capricious old whore. You give and you take and you grow on our bones*. This was not the first betrayal witnessed by the City of Gates. Likely it wasn't even the first that night. Commander Jarad, now composed, bowed to the Scribe.

"The Catacomb Children, my lady? Should I clear out the rabble?"

"Leave them," the Webweaver said. "You are dismissed. And when the offers come, Commander – remember tonight."

The man bowed even lower. Orders were barked and the guards began withdrawing. The olive-skinned aristocrat found this little comfort as the Scribe's eyes turned to them.

"Such troublesome children you are," she said. "You take after your mistress."

Hakram cleared his throat, to her horror. "Lady Scribe," he began, "we-"

"Tried to step between Catherine Foundling and Akua Sahelian," she interrupted. "An area that already promises to be littered with corpses. Take care you do not enter it so carelessly again."

The orc had enough sense not to reply at that.

"Most Esteemed Lady," Aisha said, bowing. "Should we begin our interrogation of the Catacomb Children?"

"We both know they will give you nothing of worth," the Webweaver said, but she was smiling. "Leave them here. The only redeeming aspect of tonight is that I'll get to see Assassin's face when I tell him he botched the job."

There was something in the woman's eyes that would haunt the Taghreb's dreams for months to come.

"He's going to be in a *mood*," she said with delight.

The Scribe graced them with one last look before she turned a clear pair of heels, leaving as unhurriedly as she'd arrived. Hakram and Aisha stood there for a long time, as their legionaries slowly began filtering out of the old barracks.

"Drinks?" Hakram asked.

Aisha eyed her still-shaking hands. "Ancestors forgive me, but yes."

Just another day in the Fifteenth Legion. Gods take pity on them all.

Red Skies

"This eye for an eye business is horridly proportional. I assure you, if I'm losing an eye then so is everyone else."

– Dread Empress Sanguinia II

"So you're going to be fighting this Warlock, I take it?"
Tikoloshe said.

The incubus was lounging in a camp chair, something Wekesa had believed to be physically impossible before being presented with the current evidence. The devil looked like a man in every way, the deception perfect unlike with some of his less cunning kindred: smooth dark skin and closely cropped hair, an intelligently angular face and smiling eyes. When he'd first summoned the devil Apprentice had admittedly been curious about what appearance he would take. Incubi formed their looks around the deepest desires of the individual who'd brought them into Creation, though they could discard that shape at will if they so wished. There'd been no oiled-up muscles or revealed hairless chests: Tikoloshe had come through dressed neatly and almost conservatively, his tastefully embroidered tunic topped by a collar that rose up almost up to his chin. It had surprised Wekesa, but somehow it felt accurate. There was a reason incubi and succubi were often summoned by practitioners seeking to perfect their craft: learning what they truly found attractive allowed them to discover something about themselves in a subject matter where humans were in the habit of lying to themselves. To know yourself was to know your power.

"That is the plan," Wekesa agreed, pouring himself a drink from the carafe on the table.

His tent in the camp of Malicia's rebel army – officially the actual rightful Legions of Terror, though that would have to wait on a final triumph to become reality – was a little to the side of the others, warded heavily and under instructions by Amadeus not to be disturbed. Apprentice had managed to accumulate a few creature comforts during the campaign, like a real table and a steady supply of wine, but bare necessities like a bed that wasn't a glorified block of wood or a real bathtub still escaped him. At least a few stone candles topped by blue mage fire made lanterns and their greasy scent unnecessary. Not that mud and greenery were a much better scent, admittedly.

"*Plan* is not the word that comes to mind," Tikoloshe spoke idly. "You are still young, and this Warlock is in the fullness of his power. I detect the hand of your vicious little confederate at work in this."

Amadeus had made no mystery of his opinion that the incubus should be forced to cough out all his tricks and secrets and then put down like an animal, a position that had not endeared him to Tikoloshe. Wekesa disagreed, as it happened, and his friend trusted his judgement enough to let the matter lie. The devil was too interesting to be wasted in such a manner.

"He actually tried to convince me to delay the fight until we could catch him without support," Apprentice said. "Something about hounding him until he was too weak to put up a fight, then striking the finishing blow."

"I suppose even that man can be right, once in a while," Tikoloshe conceded easily. "Pour me one as well, would you?"

Wekesa raised an eyebrow in surprise but complied, handing the devil the goblet after it was full. Their fingers touched when Tikoloshe took the cup and just that was enough to raise the tension in the tent by a notch. It would have been easier to ignore the attraction, Apprentice knew, if he hadn't been so certain the bindings on the incubus were perfect. That near-certainty that the sex would be fantastic made it even worse.

"I know for a fact devils do not need sustenance while in Creation," Wekesa said, watching the other man sip at the wine.

"We don't," Tikoloshe acknowledged. "I do, however, quite enjoy the taste of wine. The Praesi stuff is vastly inferior to the vineyards from the west, but it makes for an acceptable table vintage."

"So you can differentiate between specific kinds of tastes," Apprentice said, eyes sharpening as he leaned forward.

The eighth of the twenty-three bindings the incubus was under prevented him from ever lying, one of the many reasons the devil was such a fascinating source of information.

"I can," Tikoloshe said, hand rising to indicate an equivocation. "A consequence of both the length of my existence and what you might call my... nature."

"Lust," Wekesa said.

"Desire," the incubus corrected. "Lust is such a limited concept, and I am a most complex creature."

"You are an entity driven by an absolute," Apprentice said. "Absolutes are, by their nature, simple. They would not function otherwise."

Tikoloshe smiled. It was not patronizing or mocking: it was the smile of an educated man enjoying a lively conversation. Wekesa sipped at his wine to distract himself. He'd always had a weakness for clever men.

"Desire is to *want*," the incubus said. "I want all things, Apprentice. The pleasures of the flesh issome of the most instinctual desires to your species, so they tend to be the strongest desire in my kind as well. But I've been around for a very long time, and I've learned to be... discerning in my own desires."

"Like wine," the dark-skinned mage said.

"Fine meals, enjoyable conversation and even such small things as a bath at the perfect temperature," Tikoloshe said. "I find beautiful calligraphy as stirring as bedsport, in its own way."

Wekesa eyed him thoughtfully.

"How old are you, Tikoloshe?"

The devil laughed. "I was first called into being when the witch-queen of what you would now call the northern Principate became dissatisfied with her husbands. I was no longer young when the Miezans first came upon the shores of this continent, blown by a storm."

At least a millennium and a half, the dark-skinned mage thought. Humbling, to think that the incubus would likely exist long after all he knew had crumbled to dust.

"Seen it all before, have you?" he said.

"The Dread Empire always wounds itself, left to its own devices," Tikoloshe said. "This scrap is but a pittance compared to the War of Thirteen Tyrants and One."

"We'll be different," Wekesa said. "When we win."

The incubus laughed softly.

"Will you? Why? I've seen your leaders, Apprentice. Seen what they desire. You're lucky the pale boy isn't the one aiming for the throne – he'd murder every child in this nation with his bare hands, if it got him what he wants. Not that your 'Malicia' is much better. The woman craves control the way a starving man craves a meal."

Apprentice leaned back in his seat. "And me? Have you see what I desire?"

Tikoloshe raised an eyebrow. Such a human gesture on such an inhuman creature. His kind really were the most skillfully deceptive devils could get. The impersonation was flawless.

"You know my bindings prevent me from doing so."

"I'll just tell you, then," Wekesa chuckled. "I want to do magic."

The devil cocked his head to the side.

"Simple, isn't it?" the dark-skinned mage said.

"I wouldn't say that at all," the incubus replied softly.

"All of this..." Wekesa gestured broadly. "The backstabbing, the politics, the war. It *bores* me. I want to dissect the world, Tikoloshe. To open up Creation and see where the Gods traced their boundaries in blood and power."

"How blasphemous," the devil said delightedly.

"We will be different," Apprentice said. "For the same reason we keep beating opponents out of our league. They think they're strong because they've accumulated power and we haven't, but that's a fundamental misunderstanding. We've never used our own strength: we let Creation win for us."

"You seem remarkably lucid, for a madman," Tikoloshe noted.

"I might still die tomorrow," the mage said. "Which is why I need to ask you two questions. **I compel you to answer.** Were you trying to seduce me throughout this conversation?"

"No," the incubus replied.

"**I compel you to answer,**" he spoke again. "Are you attracted to me?"

"I am attracted to everyone," Tikoloshe said.

The dark-skinned mage drained the rest of his wine, then rose to his feet. Wekesa unbuttoned the top button of his tunic. He raised an eyebrow at the incubus.

"Well?" he said. "What are we waiting for, then?"

—

When the High Lord Duma had ordered a fresh set of forts built in the northern reaches of his demesne, it had been met with a

degree of surprise by most. The High Lordship of Aksum covered a third of the Wasteland but it had not been under threat by anyone in a long time: though Dread Emperor Nefarious had become a reclusive hedonist, the Empire was still largely at peace. Amadeus had recently told Wekesa it hadn't actually been the High Lord's notion at all. The refusal of the Clans to pay their owed tributes to the Tower had pushed the Chancellor – who'd effectively ruled Praes, in those days – to consider war with the greenskins. Though Wolof stood between Aksum and the steppes, the latter was still the last line of defence between the orcs and the Green Stretch. The Empire's bread basket had to be protected at all costs, if it came to war. Widespread food shortages caused by rampaging greenskins would lead to the kind of unrest that had toppled Tyrants so many times before.

Now those same fortifications served to hinder the advance of a rebel army, though admittedly its ranks were filled with greenskins as had been feared. Amadeus had a way with them, especially the orcs, and the Chancellor had forced the entire species to take sides through the famous debacle that was the Night of Red Winds. A costly mistake, thinking that wiping out an entire clan would cow the rest. Now that act of treachery was the battle cry of ten thousands of angry orcs, all of them fighting for the rights of Dread Empress Malicia as the rightful ruler of Praes. Under Amadeus and Grem One-Eye the rebels were flying from victory to victory, and Alaya was using that as leverage to bring the fence-sitters among the High Lords to their side. Already Nok had declared for them, and word was Kahtan might do the same soon. All very promising, if hopelessly uninteresting to Apprentice. He had more practical matters to concern himself with, anyway. Such as the fortifications ahead.

The hillfort in front of him was the northernmost in the defensive lines of Aksum, and every attempt by their little rebellion to even assess what forces were inside had been met with abject failure. Scouts who got within half a mile were made into desiccated husks by spells coming from inside, a ritual Wekesa was rather familiar with. He'd learned the underlying concepts of it, when he'd been one of the many apprentices assigned to the Warlock. Before the man had tried to kill him and then sent monsters to hunt him when Wekesa managed to escape. Before he'd fallen in with a strange Duni boy who wanted to change the Empire one corpse at a time, before he'd met a sly-humoured waitress who would be forced into the seraglio by the whims of a broken madman. He'd occurred a debt, when he'd left the Warlock's tutelage, one that predated the family he'd found since. This was his account to settle and he'd looked forward to it for a very long time.

Apprentice had garbed himself in a well-fitted set of clothes for the occasion. A traditional Soninke *agbada*, though cut a little more closely than was currently the fashion. The garb came in

three parts: a pair of loose dark grey trousers that narrowed around the ankles, a long-sleeved shirt of the same colour and the garnet, open-stitched sleeveless gown worn over them both. Effectiveness and appearance should be married when feasible, such was the Soninke way. There was a hint of golden embroidery on the gown, the patterns arcane and hard to make out. The patterns strengthened the shield amulet he wore under his clothes, which was quite necessary: he'd sunk a lot of power into the defence, but his opponent was in another league entirely. Wekesa had always known he was strong in sorcery, abnormally so for one not born to a cultivated bloodline, but inborn talent was no match for decades upon decades of accumulated power and infernal pacts.

The fort was basic, he saw, likely because High Lord Duma had skimmed off the top of the funds provided to him by the Tower for their construction. A single ring wall stood close to the summit of the hill, with a squat tower inside. Wekesa was close enough to make out the silhouettes on that wall now, the two dozens of mages flanking the middle-aged Taghreb with a prominent hook nose he'd once looked up to as a teacher. Twice on his way down the dirt path the amulet under his clothes had warmed against his skin, a sign the Warlock had tried and failed to evaporate all the water inside his body. Apprentice strolled up to the fort, only stopping thirty feet or so away from the gates. The Warlock looked like he was about to talk, so he fished out the stone in his pocket and threw it in the man's direction. It bounced off an invisible wall, getting lost somewhere on the battlements.

"A tracking charm," the Warlock sneered. "That's what you're bringing to the table?"

Wekesa took out his dragonbone pipe, casually stuffing it with bague. He struck a match and lit it, inhaling the herbs with a small sigh of pleasure.

"I'm out of juice," Apprentice replied honestly. "Couldn't even light this pipe with a bit of flame if I wanted to."

"Disappointing," Warlock said. "Though you were ever a disappointment."

"Why?" Wekesa asked. "Because I wouldn't let you feed me to a devil so you'd get a cut of my magic?"

"A bargain was struck," the older Named said. "And I will yet get my due. Did you think just a shield would be enough to stop me? It may have been crafted skilfully, boy, but my power has grown since we last met."

"I can feel your minions probing it," Apprentice noted. "I imagine as soon as they find the fault lines you'll start hammering at them."

"That was always your weakness, Wekesa," the Warlock said. "You're too feeble on the offensive. So much raw power at your disposal and you chose to specialize in an inferior branch of sorcery."

"Wards are the purest form of sorcery there is," the dark-skinned mage disagreed, inhaling the smoke and blowing it out. "Wards are boundaries, and when you look at it with clear eyes Creation is nothing but a set of interlocked boundaries set by the Gods."

One of the minions leaned close to the Named, whispering. Warlock pushed the woman away.

"You really are powerless," his old teacher said. "You come to fight *me* incapable of casting?"

"Well, I've already cast three spells today," Wekesa mused. "I can only wring out so much power out of this body without getting wrinkles and who wants *that*?"

"Lord Warlock," another minion called out. "Look up."

Apprentice did not have to look to know what they'd noticed. Red skies as far as the eye could see. The third spell he'd cast that morning was beginning to take effect, right on time. Already drops of liquid fire were starting to rain, pattering against his shield. One of the minions was set aflame and began screaming as the hellflame spread all over his body and consumed him in a matter of moments. The others hastily put up shields of their own.

"Is this all you could manage?" Warlock mocked. "A meagre rain of flame? I taught you better than that. Shaping a spell like this will drain your power for an effect any half-baked practitioner can protect themselves from. Only worth using against the giftless."

"I didn't," Wekesa said. "Create a hellstorm, that is."

The older Named looked taken aback.

"You lie," he said, beginning to smell the rat.

Apprentice blew out a stream of smoke, smiling serenely.

"You said it yourself, Warlock," he replied. "I'm just a ward specialist. Fighting you in a casting war was always doomed to failure – you have reserves of nastiness you haven't even begun to tap into, I'm sure."

"You broke a boundary," the Taghreb cursed.

"Weakened," Apprentice corrected. "Temporarily, and only for entities meeting certain parameters. Still took everything I had left."

In the distance a chunk of flaming rock the size of a small house hit the ground with a sound like thunder, spreading waves of hellflame on impact.

"And you were wrong, by the way," Wekesa continued. "Earlier. It wasn't a tracking charm. It was a homing one."

The stone that was passing into Creation from one of the lesser Hells was the size of a fortress this time. Apprentice had aligned the boundaries so it would be just above the hillfort, and ensured it would hit with the homing charm. The Warlock crushed the pebble he'd thrown into dust with a single word, but it was too late for that to change anything. Now the laws of Creation were ensuring the trajectory. Maybe if they'd seen the stone coming sooner they might have managed to stop it, but the only mage with the talent to do that was the Warlock – and Wekesa had kept him talking, knowing the older man would not be able to resist gloating.

So now, watching the other Named invoke half a dozen devil pacts to try to break the trajectory and fail against the weight of thousands and thousands of pounds of rock, Apprentice continued smiling and enjoyed his pipe. His own shield, designed over months of careful work until he'd finally granted it power into it that morning, had been crafted to keep him safe specifically through this event. Howling winds and eldritch fire blew around his protective bubble but he was safe underneath, watching his enemies be crushed by what was effectively a small mountain of rock and unholy fire. Eventually he was able to see again, and he felt his Name fill like a glass of wine. As far as he could see, in all directions, this corner of Creation had been turned into a hellish wasteland of stone and flame.

Casually emptying his pipe on the ground, Warlock began the trek back to camp.

Beast

"I stared into the abyss and found what stared back... wanting."
– Translation of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely attributed to the young Dead King

The flesh parted under her teeth and she drank deeply of the warm blood before tossing away the little man's corpse. The cattle were screaming, trying to flee, but tonight the streets belonged to her. The Cursed fell back on four feet, shaking her fur with a howl of glee. Already she was matted with red, the smell of it all over her gloriously intoxicating. One of the things thought

itself brave and stood against her, sword raised. It smelled of fear. She pounced, claws ripping through armour like parchment and that little toothpick falling uselessly to the ground with the arm that held it. They were so small, so *weak*. Her fangs tore off its face, leaving only bone and ripped muscle as she swallowed the flesh greedily. There had been fifty of them when she'd... she couldn't remember. There had been fifty, and now only thirty were left. The Cursed was still hungry, and so she prowled the cobblestones of Ater.

Bolts thudded into her back, some punching through the armour still hanging off her frame, but they were as the bites of insects. Claws sinking into stone, she leapt onto the wall of the house they were hiding on top of and pulled herself up on the roof. They tried to flee but it was much, much too late. Red in tooth and claw she fed on their fear and flesh, slaughtering the dozen like the panicked animals they were. Too soon she was the only living thing on that rooftop, fur glistening in the moonlight. She sniffed the air, finding the trail of the others. They thought that scattering would save them. As if anything could hide them from her. Leaping back into the street, she went on the hunt again.

Behind walls they huddled, but she burst through the stone to partake of the feast inside. Into the maze of streets they ran, but she could hear their heartbeats like the thunder of drums. She found, and fed. In the dark they hid, thinking themselves beyond her sight, but the darkness was an old friend. Their screams rose up to the sky, and neither desperation nor the courage of men proved shield against her wrath. She grew. Claws sharpened, her bones cracked as her limbs lengthened and the hide under the fur became harder than iron. She was larger than the armour, even with those clever straps, could handle. The plates fell to the ground as the Cursed licked her chops, tearing out the last man's innards to slurp the noisily. There were no more. Corpses, but no feed. She sniffed the air. This district was empty, but others were not.

She was hungry again.

She ran west like the wind, stone cracking beneath her weight. The Cursed slowed as she came to the boundary, smelling magic-trap-forbidden. There were two cattle-dangerous standing there. She knew them. Tall, thin, two swords. Ranger. Amused, beard, magic. Apprentice. They were in her way.

"Gods, she ate all of them didn't she?" Ranger sighed.

"Is that sympathy I hear, my dear?" Apprentice said. "Anyone stupid enough to provoke her enough for... this is clearly too stupid to live in the first place."

Two-swords looked at her. The Cursed pounced but there was a wall-not-wall. The light hurt. She howled.

"Is the ward going to hold her?" Ranger asked.

Apprentice laughed.

"She's been at this for almost an hour and ate, what – two full patrols? Last time she got in this deep she ripped her way through a full company of devils, courtesy of my old teacher. If the boundary lasts for half an hour I'll count myself lucky."

"Never seen a werewolf get this big before," Ranger said, cocking her head to the side. "I mean, she's taller than the houses."

"She's not a lycanthrope," Apprentice said. "As far as I can tell, a Warlock put a curse on her bloodline a few centuries back. And this, kids, is why you put an escapement when you cast a blood ritual."

"*Praesi*," Ranger said, shaking her head. "How long until Amadeus gets here?"

"Depends on when the messenger finds him," Apprentice replied. "The Tower is beyond my ability to scry."

The Cursed pounded at the wall-not-wall, ignoring the pain. The cattle was not fleeing. Insolence.

"Talking to Alaya again, is he?" Ranger said, disgruntled.

"Gods, am I ever not getting involved in *that* mess," Apprentice said, smirking at two-swords.

"I'm not jealous," Ranger denied immediately. "And your ward's breaking, you smug Wasteland throwback."

"I'll add another layer," Apprentice frowned.

"Don't bother," Ranger said. "Make me a gate. I'll keep her busy until he gets here."

Two-swords smiled at the Cursed.

"Come on, big girl," she said. "Let's go for a round."

—

She howled as she broke through the wall, landing on her side. Her back was broken but it reset itself with a snap and she got back on her feet, fangs bared. Ranger followed her inside the house calmly, one sword in hand. Sheathed. The predator-dangerous swung in her direction, too fast, and the wind almost sent her flying. The Cursed sank her claws into the stone and held on.

"So you can still learn even when you're like this," Ranger said. "Interesting."

She stood on two feet and hunched, reaching for the wall behind her. She tore out it out with a grunt and threw it at two-swords, but it was too slow. Boot hit her in the stomach and sent her flying through the house on the street behind. She fell back on all fours, eyed predator-dangerous.

"I've broken stone golems hitting half that hard," Ranger informed her. "You are *ridiculously* hard to hurt, sweetheart."

"She ramps up the longer she's like this," a new voice said. "Another hour and even you would have trouble with her."

Another person passed through the broken house. All steel, dark cloak. Sword but no shield. He took off his helmet: white skin, dark hair. Familiar.

"Finally," Ranger said. "You took your time."

"I was delayed," Black replied. "The Chancellor's work."

"I can probably knock her out without hurting her too much, if she's too far gone," two-swords offered, standing close to the other.

Black's hand touched Ranger's shoulder.

"She won't attack me," he said.

The Cursed growled. Insolence. All-steel walked to her slowly. He didn't smell like fear at all.

"Sabah," he said. "Look into my eyes."

She howled.

"Look into my eyes," he Spoke.

The head of the Cursed snapped up, obeying the command.

"What do you see?" he asked gently.

Pale green. Gears slowly turning, a house of steel that would grind Creation to dust. Death was looking at her through chips of jade. The Cursed shivered.

"Wake up," Black ordered.

The Cursed twitched. Bones snapped and she convulsed on the stone, feeding back into herself. The hunger was ebbing away, the warmth leaving her. Sabah woke up naked and shivering, promptly throwing up on the ground. The taste of blood and bile mixed in

her mouth. Someone wrapped a cloak around her, way too small to cover her properly from the cold.

"Gods," she rasped. "I lost it again."

Amadeus knelt at her side, putting an arm over her shoulder in comfort.

"You were meant to," he said.

Sabah folded onto herself, huddling under the cloak. She could smell Wekesa coming closer with linen in his arms. The acute senses wouldn't leave her for at least another bell.

"You think someone made her change on purpose?" Ranger said, kneeling on her left and gently patting her side.

"She was meant to rampage through an occupied district," Black said. "Kill someone important, to give the Chancellor leverage over us."

"I would have, if they hadn't stopped me," Sabah said, throat still raw. "Thank you, Hye. Things got..."

"Don't worry about it," Ranger said. "I've been itching for a good spar anyway."

Sabah tried to laugh but it came out half a sob.

"It's getting harder to keep it under control," she admitted.

"I know," Black said quietly. "But I may have a solution. Remember Istrid, the chief of the Red Moons?"

"The one who wrestled you?" Sabah vaguely recalled.

Amadeua nodded.

"She told me about a place in the Steppes," he said. "Where those who can't control the Red Rage go to learn how."

"The Chancellor told you to go to Stygia," Sabah said.

"The Chancellor can go fuck himself," Black replied frankly. "We leave tomorrow."

—

It was an old saying among the orcs that hard lands bred a hard people. The Northern Steppes proved the truth of that, particularly in winters. Snow and ice as far as the eye could see, burying the unprepared in vicious and unexpected storms. Wolves the size of a horse stalked the cold, taught over centuries that travellers made for an easier meal than the well-

protected orc cattle herds. It had been the better parts of a month since they'd left the territory of the Red Moons behind, following the directions Istrid had given them. Apprentice had gotten progressively more passive-aggressive about their destination as the days stretched, irked by the cold and the lack of decent wine. He'd tried to steal Ranger's tea this morning and gotten a knife through the hand for his trouble, to everyone else's amusement.

"It will be where it will be," Wekesa mocked for the hundredth time. "They should have called it the City of Vagueness."

"I'm sure the Clans will rename it, after such a heartfelt plea," Black said.

"Don't you get snippy at me, farmboy," the dark-skinned mage said. "I'm not the one who decided to find a place that's not on any maps and technically doesn't exist."

"*Farmboy?*" the Black Knight said amusedly. "I was a soldier, after I left the freehold. You could go with that at least."

"You were a soldier for less than a year and deserted after the only battle you were involved in," Apprentice said flatly.

"I still got paid once," Amadeus mused. "It should count."

Ranger raised an eyebrow. Sabah hid a smile: the half-elf had been ignoring the banter between those two for most of the trip, but she always paid attention whenever anything about Amadeus' past was brought up. Usually by Wekesa – Black rarely spoke about himself, even among people he trusted.

"You were in the Legions?" she said.

"I enrolled before the Fields of Streges," he said. "In my mother's old company."

"They misspelled his name on the rolls," Sabah contributed with a grin.

"No doubt the Legions are on the lookout for the wicked deserter Amadous," Wekesa said dramatically.

Ranger hummed. "I was in Procer at the time, but I heard the Fields were pretty bad for Praes."

A shadow passed over Black's face.

"An understatement if there ever was one," he said. "If there was a stronger word than *rout* I would use it."

Sabah had only ever heard rumours about what had happened there, but they all ran along the same lines. The Wizard of the West had

apparently whipped Dread Emperor Nefarious so badly the man had taken flight without even getting on a horse. Hadn't left the Tower since his return to Ater, either. Still, some good had come of the defeat. If the Black Knight hadn't died on the field Amadeus' eventual claiming of the Name would have been a lot more complicated. Murdering Black Knights was a tricky business, as they'd spent the last year teaching to half the Wasteland. Eyeing up ahead, Sabah blinked as she found a hut that hadn't been there a moment ago. Smoke was rising from it through an opening, which they definitely would have seen from a distance. The tall Taghreb cleared her throat, claiming everyone's attention. She pointed ahead without saying a word.

"Distinct lack of bones, for a place they call the Land of Bones," Wekesa said.

"They might have wine in there," Black mildly replied.

Apprentice cheerfully took the lead without any more need for convincing. Sabah had been worried they wouldn't all fit inside – she was taller than the hut by a full foot – but that worry proved unfounded. The structure was much larger on the inside than it looked from the outside, which apparently was enough to distract Apprentice from his quest to get sauced for a moment as he prodded at the walls curiously. There was someone inside, behind a fire pit. It was hard to make out too much under the pile of blankets and furs smothering the silhouette, but it looked like an orc. A woman, and an old one. Pulling at a dragonbone pipe, the stranger watched them in silence. A hint of fangs and wrinkled green skin could be made out, under sunken yellow eyes.

"You're not one of mine," the orc finally said in Lower Miezan when they were all seated.

Wekesa had been about to reply when Ranger discreetly elbowed him.

"I've been told this is where orcs come, when they want to learn how to control the Red Rage," Sabah said.

The creature's attention fell entirely on her at that. She had an unsettling gaze, and now Sabah wasn't sure it was an orc at all seated in front of her.

"I see the curse in you, girl," the stranger said. "It is not the Blessing."

"And yet," Sabah said quietly, "here I am."

"You are not of the Clans," the creature said. "How do you know of the Land of Bones?"

Sabah glanced at Black and he nodded.

"Istrid of the Red Moons told us the way," she said.

The stranger scoffed. "She knows not what she has done. Do you know what this place is, southern devil? It is the graveyard of our greatness. These are the holy grounds of the Broken Antler Horde. Destroyed, by the same people whose language you ape."

The Miezens. In Praes the histories spoke of the War of Chains, when the Soninke and the Taghreb had been brought to heel, but little of the war that had come after to force the submission of the orcs. They'd been one of the most powerful nations on Calernia at the time, she knew. They'd ransacked the Soninke kingdoms with impunity and returned to the Steppes with gold and human slaves. Even the elves had tread lightly around them.

"I am not Miezen," Sabah said. "I come from the same people who rebelled to drive them back into the sea."

The creature pulled at her pipe, blowing out a stream of red-coloured smoke. The smell of it was heavy, almost like incense.

"There is a truth in that," she conceded. "Before there was the Tower, Maleficent was Amina – and Amina was a friend to my people. It was not her who broke the promises of the Declaration."

She cast a look of thinly-veiled hatred at Wekesa, who was the only Soninke in the hut. It was an old story, this one. Maleficent had founded the Empire but ruled it for less than a decade before the High Lord of Wolof had murdered her and stolen the throne. The Soninke nobles would not brook a Taghreb ruler when they were so much more numerous and powerful than the people of the desert.

"For this, you may enter. You and no one else," the stranger said, then suddenly cackled. "Though you may not find what you think you will."

"Well, *that's* helpful," Wekesa said. "Clearly coming here was the right notion all along."

"You can wait in the cold, boy," the creature said. "As for you, Sabah the Cursed, you must pass behind me."

There was a flap there in the leather. It hadn't been there before she'd mentioned it. Why was every otherworldly entity they ran into so bloody dramatic? Sabah looked at the others. Black met her eyes and spoke for the first time since they'd entered the tent.

"Whatever is there," he said. "Win. Come back to us."

Nothing more needed to be said. Sabah crawled through the opening. She'd been expecting the cold to hit her in the face but the weather out there was dry. Rising to her feet, the Taghreb took a calm look around. She was in a broad plain of burnt out huts, the ground as far as she could see covered in a layer of ashes. Something crunched under her feet and she glanced down. Bones. Orc, by the thickness of them. They were everywhere, buried in the ashes. In the distance she could see a throne of stone, and something sitting on it. Well. It wouldn't get any closer if she didn't start walking. Sabah began the trek across the plain, the remains of dead warriors breaking under her stride. She wasn't tuned to magic, not the way Black and Apprentice were, but even she could feel something heavy at work here.

She was no longer so sure she was in Creation.

She felt the movement more than heard it, warhammer in hand faster than the blink of an eye. The heavy steel head impacted the skeleton and scattered the bones. The bronze axe it was carrying sunk into the ashes and the Taghreb sighed. It was going to be one of those days, wasn't it? All around her she heard warriors rise from the ashes, and even more rose in the distance. Hundreds of them. Thousands, even. Gods Below, how many orcs had died here? A swing of the hammer scattered another skeleton when it got close, but this was a losing battle. There would be no fighting her way through this mess with a weapon in hand. Already the Beast was licking its chops inside of her, miffed at the lack of flesh but eager for a fight. Anger brought it out against her wishes, but Sabah had surrendered to the curse of her own will before. Those times were always the worst: when she opened the door herself, it was always harder to close it. There'd be no Amadeus to bring her back here.

"But there's no one here I care about either," she told the skeletons. "You'll regret that, before we're done."

Sabah closed her eyes and let out a long breath. The Beast grinned, and the world went red.

—

The Cursed shook off the spear buried in her back, scattering the dead things with a wild swing. Time had passed. Long. The sun had come and gone several times. Her thoughts were becoming sharp again, now. The dead things still came like a horde without end. Bone-things, and others made of cold flesh and teeth that tore. Nothing she could eat. Someone was ahead of her, on a thing made of stone, but now matter how much she ran she could not get close to it. All there was was the fight. The Cursed roared and tore through the bone-things, breaking them and sinking her claws into warped flesh. Iron was no bane to her and neither was bronze. A sword cleaved the back of her leg and she slumped, slapping away

the dead and wildly turning to keep the others away. So many destroyed, and still they came. She was mighty and tall, larger than a tower, but the insects were swarming her. They bit and sliced and held on, trying to bury her with their numbers.

Her leg healed but it was slow. The well was running out. She was getting tired, as she never had before. It was unpleasant, not what the Cursed was meant to be. She growled at the bone-things but they were not afraid, could not be afraid. She stepped on the enemy, breaking them with weight, but another spear was driven into her back. Too many. They were not tired. Letting out a pained noise, the Cursed broke through the mass of dead and again tried to reach the stone-thing and what sat on it. More rose in her path, swifter than she could break them. She stopped even trying, just forcing herself to continue forward as the sharp things tore at her fur and hide. The stone... throne, that was the word. She was getting closer to it now. It was not fleeing her anymore. The Cursed took a spear to the side but leapt forward. More were massing, a flood trying to turn her back.

She howled, but the wall of spears broke her stride. She slowed. Skeletons cut through the back of her legs and they did not heal. She crawled forward, dragging herself through the ash with her front feet. The presence was a greenskin. Larger than any the Cursed had seen before. It was wearing stone and bronze, with eyes like flame and fists like hammers. It looked at her in silence. The dead were hounding her but still she crawled, and reached the steps before the stone. Her claws rose, to tear at the other, but the spears of the dead finally forced her down. She breathed shallowly. There was no more healing. The other looked down on her, face beyond description. The Cursed heaved one last time and folded back into herself, leaving Sabah naked in the ash. Slowly bleeding out from a hundred wounds. Gods, the pain. The pain was blinding. For the first time in her life the curse had failed, leaving only the woman beyond it.

"Do you understand, now?" the other said.

Sabah made a wordless noise.

"There is no winning," it said. "You cannot beat the Rage. The Beast. You have no control. It was a lie to believe you ever did."

"I'm still alive," Sabah managed.

"Yes," the other said. "You have proved worthy. Rise."

The pain receded and Sabah managed to push herself up. She rose to her feet unsteadily.

"You are not of the Clans. No matter. We will do great things, you and I."

Sabah looked into the flames that served as its eyes.

"Great things?" she said.

"You will lead others, assemble the Blessed. And together you will rip out the heart of this wretched Empire," the other said.

Visions passed through her mind. Herself, bedecked in bronze. Leading a host of humans and orcs, breaking cities and leaving behind only the grass of the steppes. A perfect horizon without end of blue sky without anything to mar it. Glory eternal, a throne of bones raised on the grounds where the Tower once stood.

"Kneel to me, child," the other said. "I will bestow upon you the control you crave. I will grant you a fate without rival."

Sabah looked into the flames, and remembered a night years ago. A green-eyed boy in a dark barn, who looked a monster in the eyes and smiled. The dark-skinned boy at his side, more fascinated than afraid. *You're not a monster at all, are you?*

"Are you a god?" Sabah asked.

"I am war," the other said. "I am blood and bronze and glory. I am the horde that was and will be."

The Taghreb chuckled quietly.

"I already have a fate," she said. "I know who it's bound to. I made that choice years ago."

"You have a greater purpose now," the other said.

"Greater? They're going to be legends, you know. My boys," she smiled. "And I'll be standing at their side. It's all right if my Role is a quiet one. I don't have as much to prove."

"*You will kneel,*" the god hissed.

"I take orders from only one person, and he ordered me to win," she said. "I will **Obey**."

She felt the Beast inside of her grin, and this time when the red came she embraced it. Sabah's body distorted and the god would have stepped back if it could.

"You have something I need," she spoke through her growing fangs. "*Give it to me.*"

There were screams this time, but they were not hers.

She parted the flap. The thing in the blankets shrieked at her the moment she came in.

"What have you *done*?"

The Tahghreb dropped the corpse she'd been dragging by the hair onto the floor. Its ribcage had been ripped open, missing the heart that still stained her lips red.

"You're going to need another god," she told the creature. "I broke this one."

Amadeus was looking at her with a searching gaze. Wekesa was eyeing the god's corpse like he was debating if he could get away with stealing it.

"Sabah?" Amadeus said.

"Captain," she replied. "Call me Captain."

Regard

"Refuge is not a city so much as it is a cluster of vagabonds, held together by awe of the Lady of the Lake. There are no laws here, save for her whims, and those she inflicts only rarely. The Kingdom Under seems to consider Refuge a protectorate, though they have no real presence on the premises, and I should not need to remind you of Lady Ranger's infamous ties to the Calamities. The Consortium must tread lightly. This is the woman who once hunted the Wild Hunt for sport, and she has not grown meeker with the passing of years."

– Varrus Ipsimos, agent for the Consortium

She'd had to steal a boat in Cleves, for no one had been willing to sell one to her when they'd guessed her destination.

They were not Lycaonese up there – Alamans, though a far cry from those of the central principalities – but living in the shadow of the Kingdom of the Dead had taught them hard lessons. People who tried to cross the Tomb, that deep dark lake festering with the animated corpses of monsters and men alike, never left its waters. Their hands joined the thousands of others reaching from the waters to drag fishermen under the deep. The crossing had not been uneventful: the Dead King now had eyes watching the path through the rocks she'd used the last time. It had made for an amusing distraction until she reached the shore on the other side of the river that fed into the Tomb. The path after that had been even more treacherous. The air had been poisoned in the Kingdom since the Seventh Crusade, thick lingering green tendrils of something toxic fouling the air, but that part Hye already knew how to deal with. She'd had cloth enchanted that covered the lower part of her face and allowed her to breathe safely, for

even if the poison could not kill a Named it could have made her sick.

That would not have been ideal, in a land patrolled night and day by massive shambling armies. And they'd gotten better at finding intruders, too: the Dead King must have implemented her suggestions from the last visit. The bone wyverns had been unexpected enough she'd almost been caught the first time they appeared, and the closer she'd come to Keter the tighter the defences had been. Using the old roads of the kingdom that had existed before this entire land had been turned to undeath wasn't even worth considering: they were all heavily guarded and in disrepair besides. No, she'd made her way through the broken countryside and kept to the shadows. It had taken her several months to make it to the old capital, the place they now called the Crown of the Dead. The seat of the Dead King's power, and where behind tall walls a permanent portal into one of the Hells stood.

Keter had once stood on a plain, but that was no longer true. Centuries on centuries of mining into the deep had made the city an island surrounded by sheer cliffs going so deep only the ever-burning fires at the bottom could be made out in the darkness. How deep that chasm ran, Hye had no idea. She'd heard the dwarves had mined around all of the Kingdom of the Dead, and immediately plugged any tunnel from there into their lands with molten steel. Whether that was true or not, it did not change the fact that there were four roads into Keter: broad ramps of stone stretched over emptiness, tread tirelessly by sentinels long dead. The walls of the city rose so high only one part of Keter could be seen from outside: a great spire of dark stone, jutting out into the sky like an arrow. An orb of hellfire always hovered above its tip, ever-shifting as the demon bound inside cast its searching gaze on the streets inside. This was the fortress that had broken the spine of five crusades. Impossible to breach, they said, by force or by stealth. Not even the most skilled of heroes could do it.

It would be Ranger's fourth visit.

Now, the Dead King had started nailing undead under the bridges so they could raise alarm after she'd climbed across under it the first time. He'd had dead sorcerers permanently assigned to stirring up sharp winds in the void between Keter and the rest of the plain after she'd rappelled her way across, the second time. He'd hardened the metaphysical borders with Arcadia after she'd slipped through there the third, and she supposed that after this one he would make sure his bone wyverns collapsed when they were captured. The giant bone creature, flapping through the air more by the grace of magic than by its leathery wings, crashed into the walls of Keter with a resounding clap. She leapt off its back and landed on the stone, finding purchase for her hands and

immediately beginning to climb. Hye had been noticed, of course, and she still had the better part of a hundred feet before her before reaching the top of the ramparts. The bloody wind sorcerers had crashed her 'borrowed' mount before she could get any closer. The gaze of the demon in the orb landed on her and it began *screaming*, the noise shaking the air.

"Hello, Artie," she waved.

It kept screaming. The first arrow streaked past her as she was already moving, scuttling up and to the side to present a harder target. There were, in Keter, four kinds of undead. The Bones, as she called them, were the ones currently manning the ramparts as the demon alarm sounded and trying to put arrows in her. They were not particularly clever on their own, no more intelligent than dogs, but the Dead King could seize control of them at any moment. The second kind, the Binds, would actually be dangerous. Those had souls bound in their bodies, and were just as sentient as the living. The third kind, the Revenants, she would not encounter until she was deeper into the city. They were, as a matter of fact, the reason she had come in the first place. As to the fourth, there was no need to name the category. There was only one entity in it, the Dead King himself. Wedging her feet into outcroppings – they really needed to saw those off, it made climbing easier than it had to be – Hye wrenched out her bow and notched an arrow. *Knock, draw, release.*

The Bind who'd been directing the Bones shooting at her took it right in the skull, the impact of the arrow shattering the bone under the helmet it punched through and releasing the soul inside. That should buy her just long enough to make it to the top, she thought as she slung the longbow over her back.

It did, as it turned out, though by then masses of dead warriors were snaking their way up the stairs leading into the city. Blades in hand, Ranger idly scattered the closest Bone as she considered her options. The Dead King was trying to clog up the way until his heavy hitters could arrive, she decided, or he had this entire part of the walls blasted with sorcery. She'd need to move fast. Sheathing one of her shortswords, Hye caught the wrist of another Bone and wrenched out the arm. This one was wearing old Proceran armour long gone out of style, but most importantly he'd had a shield as well as the longsword now clattering on the ground. A big tower shield, the same kind the Praesi used in their Legions of Terror. Bronze and iron instead of steel, she noted. That must have been a truly ancient warrior. Idly sheathing her other sword as she danced out of the reach of another Bone, Ranger took the shield and broke into a run. Those stairs had cover on both sides, thick stone borders with a smooth top.

With a shout of glee she leapt down and put the tower shield under her, using it as a slide. The sheer angle of the borders was enough for her to keep gaining momentum, going fast enough that the Bones headed for her were too slow to react to strike at her. There were a few Binds in the line but those she slapped away with her blades, crouched and grinning.

She was about halfway down when she realized that, for once, the Dead King had anticipated her. There were spikes of iron in the stone from halfway up, jutting out at the right angle to catch her. Before the first impact she leapt off the shield and continued into a run, letting her Name strengthen her limbs so she could keep the pace. That round went to the Corpse Lord, then. Having to tap into her Name this early meant she'd have less fuel when things got interesting. She leapt again, ducking under an arrow and landing in a roll.

Hitting the paved streets of Keter, Crown of the Dead, Hye Su eyed the gathering hordes around her. Run? Run.

—

The problem with undead soldiers, Ranger decided, was that they never got tired. She'd been awake for three days and night herself, and if not for her mother's blood running through her veins she would likely be dead in an alley. She'd inherited different things from her parents: in body she was her mother's daughter, but in mind her father's. Dada had never been one to let common sense get in the way of an adventure, to her mother's mild despair. Being a half-elf had few drawbacks, save for the Emerald Swords occasionally trying to purge you from existence, but then Mother had taught her a few tricks to deal with their lot. She had, after all, taught most of them. Not that elf-killing tactics would help her much here, Hye thought. Putting down a handful of extremely powerful individuals was a different kind of fighting than scything your way through a horde of weaker ones.

Ducking into the shadows at the patrol of Binds passed her, Ranger waited until she could no longer hear their steps before moving again. This deep into the Hall of the Dead there were no Bones. Calling where she was the basement of the keep would have been inaccurate, for beneath her went so deep inside the earth the furthest levels were flooded with molten stone. She was around the middle, really, and almost where she needed to be. Putting a spring to her step, the Ranger ghosted through the corridors until she reached the wide-open gates of the nameless room where the portal to Hell stood. The hall was broad and long, had once been a throne room, but now it was bare save for the sculpted obsidian arch surrounding the wound in Creation.

That, and the two silhouettes standing by it.

One was a man, pale and clad in silver-lined armour. His face could not be seen under the helmet and the long white cloak did not manage to hide the heater shield and longsword he kept. The other was a woman, tall and massively built. She had no weapons but for the stripes of leather around her knuckles. No armour but a threadbare tunic, and she hadn't even bothered to wear boots. *Promising*. Both Revenants stirred when she strode into the room, walking forward at a pace.

"So one of you is one of those fancy monk-types from Levant," she said. "And the other some kind of knight? Help me out here."

The man unsheathed his sword.

"I was the White Knight, once," he said gravely.

"Now we're talking," Ranger murmured.

"I was," the woman said, "the Sage of the West."

Unsheathing a single sword, Hye offered them a swordsman's salute.

"I am the Ranger," she said. "I hunt those worth hunting. Rejoice, for you qualify."

Nothing more needed to be said. The fell on her without hesitation, the Knight's sword coming for her neck and the Sage sweeping her feet. Hye tested a parry against the sword and found the dead hero's strength not overwhelming – she would not need to dodge every time. The sweep she avoided deftly by leaping, leg wrenching out to land a kick on the Sage's chin – or would have, had the hero not caught the blow and casually tossed her away. Ranger landed on her feet a dozen feet away, then slowly unsheathed her second sword. This, she reflected, might actually be challenging. She knew from experience that this far in the Dead King would not longer bother trying to drown her in lesser undead, so she could take the time to enjoy herself with these two.

The Ranger stepped forward and let her blades sing.

—

The Sage was the first to go. She could even now turn her skin harder than steel, the ghost of an aspect to a Name she no longer held, but steel was something she'd learned to cut long ago. A hand lost, then a leg, and from there on no amount of fancy magic hand-to-hand tricks was going to save her. The Knight, though? The former White Knight was the hardest fight she'd had in a long time. A century, at least.

"You have no aspects to tap in," the Revenant eventually said, batting away a probing blow and attempting to bash her face in with his shield. "Unusual."

Hye laughed.

"You have it the wrong way, Knight," she said. "I'm always tapping into my aspects."

She flicked her sword around his and wrenched upwards, forcing the blade out of his gauntleted hand in the exact same way he'd done to her early in the fight.

"Learn," she said.

The White Knight effortlessly snatched his blade out of the air and struck, but she'd moved ahead of him. The blade passed through the air, and when he brought it back towards his body her own followed. Like flowing water filling a cup. Her own strike bit deep into his armour, shattering the steel and the the skin and bones underneath.

"Perfect," she said.

The former hero was beyond pain and wounds meant nothing to him, save for the fact that the broken bone of his shoulder made it harder to swing his sword. He retreated cautiously, shield raised, as he sought a better angle of attack. Hye idly sheathed one of her swords and hummed as she came for him. The moment crystallized for her, the Knight carefully placing his sword stroke and the shield rising as he prepared to charge her. It was timed perfectly. She would be caught by one or the other, because she'd come forward too quickly with an improper guard. A swordsman of the dead hero's calibre would need only one opening like that to kill her. It would not touch her. She spun around the shield, and if the Knight had still been human enough for such a thing his eyes would have widened. It wasn't that Hye had become faster, because she hadn't. Tricks like that could be adjusted to, countered. Just sinking the power of your Name into your limbs was a brute force application. What she did was... different. She simply was not where the enemy's weapon was. Her single short sword swept like quicksilver, taking the Knight's head. In a blur of movement, she relieved him of one limb after another and then broke the spine itself. Slowly, the necromancy began seeping out of the dead hero onto the floor.

"Transcend," she finished calmly.

She was out of breath. Ahead of her, the portal flickered. That was as much of an invitation as she was going to get. Sheathing her blade, Ranger idly passed into Hell. The other side led into a banquet room, for the Dead King owned the gate and the places it led to. A long table with stone benches, covered with plates

of still-warm food and quite a few carafes of wine, was headed by a wooden throne. On it sat a dark-haired child, too pale to be alive and too gaunt to even try pretend it was.

"Really?" she said, headed for a roasted chicken. "The creepy child route is what we're doing? You have to know that's a horrible cliché."

She was starving, so she broke off a drumstick and bit into it with relish.

"Stop killing my heroes," the Dead King said. "I only have so many to spare."

"I'll think about it," Ranger lied.

The ancient abomination sighed.

"The wyvern trick won't work twice," he said.

"You should also take care of those footholds on the wall," she spoke through a full mouth, grabbing a plate and stuffing it with couscous. "The spikes were a nice touch, though."

The monster kept a surprisingly good table, for a creature that no longer needed to eat. Kingly habit, probably.

"Why do you darken my hall, Ranger?" the Dead King asked.

"Darken your..." she snorted. "That's rich, it really is. Can't a girl visit an old friend?"

"We are not friends," the lich denied.

"That's a carafe of my favourite wine," Hye said, pointing towards the receptacle in question.

"Coincidence," the Dead King said.

Ranger sat on the bench, spitting out a chicken bone before she could choke on it.

"Mama went back across the sea," she said. "Finally talked a Baalite captain into taking her there to lay my father's bones to rest."

"You should also go there," the monster said. "Far away. Give serious thought to never coming back."

"I hear what you're saying," Ranger said. "I need a hobby."

"You could leap off a cliff," the Dead King suggested.

Hye poured herself a cup of wine to wash down the couscous.

"It's just been so *boring*, lately," she said. "The most excitement there's been is Praes trying to invade Callow again and getting hilariously brutalized on the Fields of Streges."

"The Tower has not been in worthy hands for centuries," the Dead King said contemptuously.

"We're not talking about your weird boner for Triumphant again," Ranger said. "I really don't want to know the logistics of how that would have worked."

She paused. Boner. That was was funny because he was undead so-never mind. She had a little wine.

"Anyway," she said, "I'm thinking about a hunting trip in Arcadia. The Wild Hunt was very uppity when I met them."

"If I could lock you in there, I would," the Dead King said wistfully.

"You don't mean that," Ranger dismissed. "Wait – are you trying to distract me while massing devils outside this room?"

There was a long pause.

"No," the Dead King lied.

"Good talk," Ranger said, rising to her feet hastily. "I'll see you in a few years."

"Please don't," the lich said.

Hye made for the door, then paused and backtracked. She stole another chicken leg and a carafe of wine before legging it.

—

The tavern was nearly empty at this time of the night – people in the Green Stretch were farmers, went to bed early and rose with dawn. She would have noticed the three who entered regardless: they had the feel of Names to them, that knotting in the threads of Fate. They headed straight for her table and Hye sipped at her wine thoughtfully. They made for a strange bunch. Two men: one a tall and almost ridiculously handsome Soninke, the other a pale Duni type with vivid green eyes. Amusingly shorter than his companion. The Taghreb woman dwarfed them both, at least eight feet tall and built like a living battering ram. The Duni must have been the leader, because he was the one to talk. He gestured at the empty chairs around the table.

"May we?"

"You are the size of at least two people," Ranger said, pointing at the Taghreb.

"Is that why I keep eating them?" she deadpanned.

Hye grinned. Well, at least they had a sense of humour. That was surprisingly rare in in villains.

"By all means," she said, gesturing at the chairs. "What can I do for you?"

"You would be the Ranger, yes?" the Soninke asked in a voice betraying his education.

No weapons on him. Mage, most likely. Praesi did love their sorcery.

"That's me," she said.

The Duni sat across from her and smiled. He was handsome, if not as much as his friend. Not really her type, but she could appreciate eye candy when it was offered.

"I hear," he said, "that you can get people into Callow."

Ranger hummed. Well, that should kill a few months at least.

Reign

"Authority is the lie we all agree on for fear of chaos."

-Dread Empress Maleficent II

There would be three attempts on her life.

Alaya understood this instinctively, even as she rode through the gates of Wolof. The High Lady Tasia Sahelian had offered her surrender before the Siege of Aksum began, anticipating a defeat there even with the Warlock taking the field to support the Chancellor's claim. She had been correct in this: Wekesa had buried his old teacher under the weight of his scorn and walked out of the burning wasteland the undisputed bearer of that Name. Terms had been agreed on before the walls of Aksum were ever breached, negotiated through intermediaries in person as they gave instructions to their representatives through scrying links. Neither of the women had trusted the other not to make an assassination attempt through a direct scrying link given the skill of the mages they had at their disposal.

Alaya had extracted concessions and not minor ones. Enough coin to pay for the campaign Amadeus had waged in her name and more, surrender of artefacts and ancient magical texts – and most importantly, the giving of an oath of fealty at the Tower. In person. The public act of submission had lent Alaya the legitimacy she had desperately needed, allowed her to bring minor

nobility in line without needing to use swords or gold for it. In exchange Tasia had been confirmed as High Lady of Wolof, her lands and privilege left untouched even if she had been one of the most vocal supporters of the would-be Dread Emperor Baleful. Already she'd had some very pointed conversations with Maddie on the subject. He was of the opinion that Tasia's head should be on a pike above the gates of Ater, and had not been shy of informing the High Lady of that same opinion. To her face. In front of the entire court.

Her friend – perhaps her only friend, for Wekesa would always love Amadeus more than her – had a brilliant mind, she'd known that since the beginning. Since they had met at her father's inn. There'd been desire in his eyes when he'd first looked at her, but unlike most men he had *listened* when she spoke. He had argued and engaged and when he disagreed with her he always presented a cogent and coherent point of view. He did not realize, she thought, how rare a thing that was. The boy he'd been and the man he'd become both had minds sharp as a razor, but they had been shaped by the way they'd ascended to power. By strife against the Heir, the treachery of the Chancellor and the same rebellion that had seen her become Dread Empress Malicia, First of her Name.

Amadeus wanted to hang every noble in the Wasteland and the Devouring Sands, strip their bloodlines all of lands and turn the entire Empire into freeholds answerable only to the Tower. There was an almost seductive simplicity to that thought, of doing away with the vicious aristocrats and the knives they meant for her, but like all simple solutions to complex realities it would do more harm than good. For one it would resume the civil war after having stripped them of their only noble allies, and therefore the coin said allies had provided to keep their armies fed and equipped. And then, of course the cities of the High Lords would have to be taken. Wolof, Okoro, Thalassina, Kahtan. Aksum they still held, and Foramen was under the occupation of the Tribes – another knot she would have to untie, and soon. Those four cities were some of the oldest in Praes, and most of them had been accumulating wards and artefacts since Triumphant's fall. There would be no surrender if Alaya's armies came to end the aristocracy, even if she was winning. Especially if she was winning.

Only desperate deals with Below and the menagerie of horrors they unleashed.

It was, she believed, possible to siege and take those strongholds with the armies they had. But the cost of it in lives and resources would ruin Praes for a generation, at the very least. Leave the Empire weak to the incursions of the Order of the White Hand always watching from the Blessed Isle, leave it ripe for another goblin rebellion or the same secession of the Clans that had very nearly happened under the Chancellor's rule.

Alaya would not oversee the collapse of Praes as an empire, not to obtain results she could seek through other means. The disconnect, here, was one of perspective. Amadeus as a Named had fought authority every step of the way, while Alaya had worked within it until she could assert control over the establishment. The Black Knight's responses to problem were either assimilation or destruction, while the Dread Empress – especially one without a Chancellor – had to take more indirect paths.

Amadeus did not want to have authority in Praes, he wanted fresh clay he could shape as he wished. And he thought that to make that happen, the aristocracy had to be buried. It would not work. Two millennia of history, of entrenched cultural mores, could not be washed away with blood. If they killed all the High Lords, lesser lords would seek to take their places. If they killed them too, richer landholders would seek to become nobility. Ambition to rise was the beating heart of Praesi identity, it was who they were. Much as she hated the thought, it was not something Amadeus could understand: he was Duni, had always been an outsider. Would always be. It was hard to embrace a culture that barely considered you to be a person, that castigated you for sins committed by the long-dead Miezsans or destroyed crusaders occupants. Alaya sympathized, but Dread Empress Malicia could not afford such sentimentality.

And so here she was, riding into the stronghold of High Lady Tasia with little escort save for her Sentinels – the same faceless soldiers who had once nailed her father to the floor and dragged her to the Tower – and her spymistress. Ime, once servant to the Heir and now one of her most trusted. Old blood, the kind of lineage that would be accepted as a sitting member of the Imperial council without protest. These things mattered, now that she was no longer the leader of a rebellion. Actions had broader and subtler consequences than they had in those simpler days.

"There's no archer in range," Ime said, bringing her horse closer as they began trotting down the avenue. "Or mage."

"She would never be that crass, darling," Alaya chided her spymistress. "Besides, she knows full well that if one of her retainers takes my life Black will torch the city and salt the ashes."

"She'll try *something*, Malicia," the spymistress said. "If she doesn't she loses too much face with the other High Lords."

"She already has," the Empress said mildly.

She never would have seen the blow coming, had she not expected it.

"**Halt**," she Spoke.

The two Sentinels froze, one halfway to sinking his knife in her back and the other still clearing his sword from the scabbard. Interesting, that Tasia had found a way to overcome the conditioning and indoctrination all members of the personal guard of Tyrants went through. Wekesa had suggested it would be possible in one of their talks, though likely not without breaking the minds of the individuals involved. But Warlock, however talented, did not have access to a spell repository predating the Miezan occupation. No protection was flawless. Ime's knife was already in her hand – the other one hidden away to silently cast – but such an intervention would not prove necessary.

"Kill yourselves," the Dread Empress added calmly.

Without hesitation, the two Sentinels rammed their blades into their own throats.

"We could have interrogated them," Ime said as they watched the assassins twitch in their death throes.

"And found nothing useful," Alaya said. "Tasia will have ripped anything relevant out of their minds already – and likely framed one of my allies. You know this, Ime. Compose yourself."

The dark-skinned woman breathed out once, then became the picture of serenity.

"My apologies for the lack of poise," the spymistress said, inclining her head.

The Empress patted her hand affectionately. They had shared a bed several times, and she would have to see to it Ime did not become overly attached. It would be too glaring of a weakness in a woman of her position. Fondness and friendship were all well and good, but Alaya had no intention of ever having a consort.

"Already forgotten," the Empress said, guiding her mare to resume movement down the avenue.

She closed her eyes and smiled. *One, Tasia. Do not make me wait overlong for the others, it would be most inelegant.*

—

The solar where the High Lady Tasia received her guests was one of the oldest structures in the Empire. Once the throne room of the petty kings the Sahelians had murdered to rule over Wolof, over the centuries it had become a private reception hall for the rulers of the city. It was, of course, larger than her father's entire inn had been. The light-coloured wood panelling – hickory, Alaya believed it was called – that covered the walls was from a tree that did not grow within the borders of Praes. It was found

almost exclusively in the southern stretches of the Kingdom of Callow, a subtle statement of Sahelian power and influence. The encrusted precious stones and gildings that tastefully adorned everything of importance in the hall were to be expected for a family as old and wealthy as this one, but the way arched ceiling had been enchanted was unique even among Praesi. It was a perfect reproduction of the sky above Ater, the illusion spells crafted to beautifully Alaya could almost have believed she was looking at the true sky.

"It is a wonder, truly," the Empress said, sparing it an admiring glance.

Tasia smiled, in a way perfectly pitched to carry friendliness without dipping into condescension. The craftsmanship there was as skilful as that of the ceiling. The High Lady of Wolof was beautiful, she thought. Soninke cheekbones, perfect eyebrows and full lips. Her eyes were fully golden instead of the lesser tinge of younger bloodlines, and her long hair was immaculately braided. Alaya's own beauty would leave this one indifferent: a meditation trick the Sahelians had stolen from the Watch would ensure that much. It was recorded in the Tower that the ruling line of Wolof possessed it, though the exact method was unknown.

"The city has many ancient treasures, Your Most Dreadful Majesty," the woman said. "They are, of course, at your full disposal."

"A comforting thought," Alaya said earnestly.

"It is a regret that will long haunt me, that I stood with the Chancellor," Tasia said. "I did not understand what I was facing, Your Majesty. I do not think any of us did, until the end."

"Strife is the face of Praes," the Empress quoted.

One of Sheherazad the Seer's more famous verses.

"This is true," the High Lady acknowledged. "Yet women in our positions must choose our battles carefully. I made a decision in haste, though you have been kind in your chastisement of it."

Oh, how talented you are at this, Alaya thought admiringly. Since the moment she'd received her, Tasia had been presenting herself as regretful for her actions. Yet also experienced, well-connected and apt at navigating the political currents of the court. Even now, that subtle reminder that they were both women while also vaguely equating their respective levels of authority? Beautifully done. Then she reinforced that she had been made contrite, that Alaya had power over her. *Gods, the things I could achieve with a woman like you in my service.* Not even a bell into this visit and Tasia had made herself the obvious candidate as

Chancellor in all of Praes. A shame, that the High Lady very much wanted her dead.

"Some of my advisors find me too merciful," she said lightly. "I must admit that after my years in the Tower, I find the prospect of such relentless violence distasteful. There are more civilized ways of doing things, don't you agree?"

"Your wisdom in this shines brightly," Tasia said.

For a heartbeat, Alaya saw, her meditation trick had almost broken. *You are right to be afraid, my dear*, the Empress thought. *My predecessors had Named, but I have the Calamities. None of you understand the depth of that meaning yet.* Sipping at the exquisite tea brew her host had provided, the Empress decided that she had reached the correct point in the conversation to pull the leash. Earlier would have been uncouth, but later than this would be diffident.

"They will not be joining us, I'm afraid," she said.

Tasia's face showed surprise, a flawless act threaded with a bit of truth.

"Your Majesty?"

"The assassins," Alaya elaborated, setting down her cup with a nearly inaudible clink.

"You believe an attempt on your life will be made?" the High Lady said, the picture of outraged bewilderment. "I beg of you, my Empress, give me the names of those you suspect. They will be put to the question immediately."

"Oh, they're quite dead," the woman who had once been a waitress and now ruled an empire said. "Some people have assassins, you see, but I have *the* Assassin. I must say I am surprised they could penetrate your city's defences, especially since I believe we were both targets in this clumsy escapade."

The corpses would never be found. Let Tasia wonder about how that was possible, it should occupy her for a few sleepless nights. These three killers had been meant to kill her and severely wound Tasia. Amadeus would be fed the lie that both of them could have been saved but that the healers had, selfishly, decided to prioritize the life of their patron above that of her own. They thought that would be enough to direct his wrath at the mages instead of Wolof – though afterwards, a trail would be laid to direct him at the High Lady of Nok. That they actually thought Maddie would be taken in by that was highly amusing to her. The commonly-held belief that all Duni were idiot labourers good only for farming was continuing to talk aristocrats into stabbing themselves in the foot even after all these years.

"I am distressed you were truly unaware, High Lady Tasia," she continued earnestly. "So many at court speak well of your mastery over Wolof that I was taken in by their enthusiasm."

The other Soninke was too old a hand at this game to let the flare of rage she must have felt at that show in any way. Already she must be realizing that the story would be spread across the nobility of the Empire within days. They would guess the attempt had Tasia's hand behind and that it had not only been thwarted but turned into a source of humiliation – leading to the implication that the High Lady could not even keep control of her own fief. *That makes two, darling. Now give me the third.*

"Your Majesty," the dark-skinned woman said, rising from her seat only to kneel at the Empress' feet. "With your leave, I will not rest until I have learned who seeks to take our lives. Justice must be meted out, harshly."

And there it is, Alaya thought. The third knife, the subtle one. You expect to rise my Chancellor, to wait patiently until the time is ripe and take my throne and my servants for your own.

"Oh, Tasia," she said softly. "You really don't understand who you're dealing with, do you?"

She chuckled.

"You will not be my Chancellor."

The calm, finally, shattered.

"My Empress?" she said, face blank.

"It won't be High Lady Jaheera, as you are so deathly afraid of," Malicia added. "There won't be a Chancellor at all."

"Your Majesty," she said slowly, "claimants have already begun to emerge."

"They will die," Malicia said, as if she was discussing the weather. "And keep dying, until the lesson has been learned."

There was a flicker of fear in those golden eyes, gone almost too quickly for her to see it. Blasphemy had a way of doing that, in the old bloodlines. To censure a Name entirely was without precedent, as far as the Empress knew.

"Do you know why I chose Malicia as my reigning name?" she asked. "Maleficent the Third was bandied around by many, before the coronation. A dear friend of mine even suggested Trustworthy, so that my enemies would not be able to plot without feeling like fools."

Tasia remained silent, for this single moment entirely lost.

"I chose Malicia," the Dread Empress of Praes said, "because it is without precedent. Not a legacy."

She smiled pleasantly.

"I will not raise flying fortresses, you see. I will not craft plagues or turn armies invisible. We've tried that, Tasia, and it *failed*. The Age of Wonders is over. It died quietly, with a whimper, and the rest of Calernia moved on. It is time we did as well."

She sipped at her tea again.

"Now do sit down, darling. You must tell me where you obtained this brew, it is exquisite."

Crowned

"That slip of a girl from Rhenia is playing ruler, coming south with her pretty little army. I'll have driven her out of Brus by winter, then we can turn our attentions to real threats like the Princess of Aisne."

– Extract from the correspondence of Prince Dagobert of Lange, dated four months before the fall of Lange

Routine was something Cordelia embraced.

There were only so many hours in a day, to her regret, which made it important to regiment them so she could get the most out of what she had. Rising with dawn, she broke her fast with her closest advisors and took measure of any difficulties they might have encountered. Afterwards she walked the length of the fortress-city's ramparts, allowing the brisk morning air to finish waking her as she paused to talk with soldiers. It was important, particularly in Lycaonese lands, to have the love of the army. The principality of Rhenia as she'd inherited it was more an army with a land than a land with an army, every institution in it shaped so that they could support country-wide mobilization at any moment. It had been decades since the Chain of Hunger had crossed the Three Rivers in numbers larger than a few hundreds, but her people had long memories: there'd been a time where every spring had thousands of hungry ratlings throwing themselves at the walls. Those days would come again, she knew as every Hasenbach before her had known deep in their bones. And when they did, her principality would be prepared.

For all that, in the two years since she'd become the Prince of Rhenia she had attempted to broaden the horizons of her people. While Lycaonese soldiers fought and died to keep the rest of Procer pristine, southern princes feasted and grew rich while

sneering at the coarseness of the very soldiery saving them from the perils of the north. Their lands were fertile, compared to the rocky northern fields, and the numbers of southerners had been swelling for generations. Until recently, anyway. Since the First Prince had died, the rest of the Principate had taken to devouring itself with ugly zeal. The reforms Cordelia had dreamed of as a child, of tying the Lycaonese principalities together through common trade laws and the absence of borders, had been burnt up by the fires of civil war. None of the northern rulers were interested in implementing economic or diplomatic reforms when there might be an Alamans army at their doorstep demanding submission any day. Clearly, any progress to be made would have to wait until a First Prince or Princess was elected.

Or so Cordelia had thought when she was still a child of ten, her mother serving as her regent after a ratling raid took her father's life. Margaret Hasenbach, once Margaret Papenheim, had never been entirely comfortable ruling the principality. She'd been a field commander for her brother in Hannover until her marriage and had always balked at having to rule Rhenia when others did the fighting for her. Cordelia had begun taking on responsibilities as seneschal of the keep by age twelve, and by age thirteen effectively ran the fortress and its dependencies while Margaret Ironhand rooted out the ratling nests infesting the mountains. She'd died when Cordelia was fourteen, not by the blades of her enemies but by the affliction known as the bloodless heart. Priests could not heal what had been born weak: they could soothe the pains of the children of the Heavens, but not reverse what the Gods Above had wrought. Cordelia's uncle, the Prince of Hannover, had served as her regent for the last year before she came of age but he'd never presumed to contradict her in anything.

Uncle Klaus, a childless widower who'd flatly refused to remarry after the death of his deeply -loved wife, had always treated her more as a daughter than a niece. He'd gone as far as naming her his heir presumptive above any of the branch Papenheims, a decision that had caused some unrest when made official. Even now he was in Rhenia as often as Hannover, the most trusted of all her councillors. She'd not been shy in leveraging her uncle's fame as a military commander when forging the four Lycaonese principalities into a single united front, one that would give pause to any southern prince who would command the allegiance of any single Lycaonese ruler by force of arms. In some ways the reforms she'd sought as a youth had come to pass: in her correspondence she now spoke not only for Rhenia and Hannover but also for Bremen and Neustria, an alliance the match of any of those setting the rest of the Principate aflame. And yet the Alamans and Arlesite rulers she wrote to insisted on treating her as an idiot child, to be deceived into supporting them by honeyed words and empty promises.

Cordelia Hasenbach was nineteen and well-bred, so she did not throw tantrums, but some of the letters she received made her wish she could choke the southerners the same way her mother had famously done to a ratling warlord. Correspondences, as it happened, was what occupied her time for half a bell after touring the fortress walls. On this particular morning she chose to read her missives in the squat hall overlooking the training yard, allowing the sound of drilling recruits to wash over her. A single cup of watered-down wine stood by the sheaths of parchment covering her table, sparsely indulged in. Uncle Klaus was 'keeping her company' as she worked, which meant he was resting his elbows on the balustrade, on his third skin of mead and regularly heckling the recruits below. Decorum was rarely a skill Lycaonese rulers prized, to her despair. Cordelia put down the letter she'd been reading and reached for the wine, allowing herself a fuller sip than usual.

A shame she despised the sensation of being drunk. After that letter, it felt almost warranted.

"Your father got that same look on his face, whenever people wanted him to arbitrate farming disputes," Uncle Klaus said, laughter in his eyes.

The Prince of Rhenia put down her cup gingerly, touching her pristine lips with a cloth as etiquette dictated when a highborn lady drank spirits.

"Not an inapt metaphor, considering the pettiness of what was put to ink," she admitted.

Klaus snorted, fingers coming up to put a semblance of order to his salt-and-pepper beard. It was getting shaggy, Cordelia noted. She'd have to arrange for a barber to attend him tonight, one that would not be cowed by her uncle's ferocious scowling.

"You're still talking to those idiots down south?" he said. "I don't know where you got that patience of yours from, because it's certainly not your mother."

"One of those southern princes is likely to rule Procer in the years to come," Cordelia said. "Cultivating a civil relationship before the ascension can only be to our benefit."

The older man chuckled, dropping down on the seat across from her and bringing the skin of mead to his mouth to pull at it.

"And how *is* that civility going?" he asked.

Well-bred ladies did not scowl, Cordelia told herself. They were not, however, above having a man's favourite fur coverlet disappeared and replaced with a fancy velour one. She'd even see

to it it was embroidered in the Arlesite way, with fragments of courtly poetry and scenes of duels fought for praise and honour.

"Cleves and Hainaut pledge neutrality in all fights to come," she said. "If they take any more losses they will no longer be able to effectively watch over the Tomb."

"They never should have sent men south," Uncle Klaus growled. "Just because the Dead King's being quiet doesn't mean he's not watching. They have a *duty*, like we do."

Cordelia rather thought he uncle was doing those particular princes injustice, but she did not comment. The principalities of Cleves and Hainaut formed, with Rhenia and Hannover, what should be considered Procer's most vital line of defence. If the Kingdom of the Dead began looking outwards again, they would be the ones charged with holding the line until southern armies could be mustered. The fair-haired Prince of Rhenia agreed with her uncle that above all those rulers should look to seeing their walls fully manned, but these were ultimately Alamans princes. They were more involved in the Ebb and the Flow than northerners, bound by the intricate webs of alliance that spanned the centre of the Principate. Neutrality from the onset would have been difficult for them to maintain, with their cousins and nephews taking up arms so close to their own borders.

"Those pledges are the only pleasant news this day has brought," Cordelia said. "The rest is... unpromising."

"Aequitan and their allies got whipped all the way out of Creusens," Klaus frowned. "That should knock them out of the war. With his back secure, Lange will go after Aisne – the winner of that tussle will get the crown, by my reckoning."

"Princess Aenor of Aequitan raised another army as of the last fortnight," the fair-haired prince said. "Levies armed with dwarven weapons. They will resume their offensive as soon as they have gathered in sufficient numbers."

The Prince of Hannover scowled.

"That's the third host she wrecked on the field," he said. "Who'd be fool enough to lend her the coin for a fourth?"

"The Pravus Bank," Cordelia replied quietly.

Fury flickered across the older man's face until he mastered it.

"You *told* them it's Praesi gold, Cordelia," he hissed. "This flirts with godsdamned treason."

It had taken her years, to ferret out that it was the Tower pouring gold into the defeated princes of Procer. Years and the

help of her cousin, become the Augur by the grace of the Heavens. She'd related that truth to every ruler in Procer within the month after she'd acquired solid proof, to warn them from allowing the Dread Empress to continue fanning the flames of civil war. To no avail. The still took loans, still raised armies with them, and after near two decades of strife hatreds now ran so deep princes would rather be up to their neck in Praesi debt rather than allow their rivals to triumph. It was madness, the worst kind of madness. The first fluctuating alliances had eventually turned into a handful of steady blocs that bloodied each other on the field every summer without ever coming closer to the crown, ruining the very Principate they wanted to rule. Fields were going fallow, trade was effectively dead and rulers spent peasants like coin. The sheer disregard princes were showing to the men and women they were supposed to rule disgusted her deeply.

"They will not listen, Uncle Klaus," she said tiredly. "They do not care anymore. Dagobert of Lange demands we raise our armies and support his claim, or suffer brutal taxes under his reign. Constance of Aisne offers to recognize me as overlord of all Lycaonese if I assault Dagobert's back, as if this sort of splintering would not effectively dismantle the Principate."

"So let them mutilate each other," Klaus said. "They don't deserve our help."

Cordelia allowed herself to sigh. This kind of thinking, she knew, was common among Lycaonese. Let the southerners kill each other, what did the people of the mountains care for it? It would also be the death of the greatest nation Calernia had ever seen. A brutal but swift civil war would not have allowed for entire regions of the Principate to grow to despise each other. This drawn-out farce, however? As of this moment, Procer was effectively divided between four or five kingdoms that would rather see their cities burn than allow one of the others to rule over them. Another decade of this and it would be the end of the Principate. The fracture lines were already visible and growing deeper by the year.

"We have a duty, Uncle," Cordelia said.

"To fucking Dagobert of Lange?" Klaus laughed. "I wouldn't toss the bastard a copper if he was begging on the street. We owe that man *nothing*."

"Think beyond our borders," the blonde woman said. "Think of what it *means*, if Procer splinters."

"It means we don't send coin south ever again to men who've never seen the Grave," the Prince of Hannover said coldly. "It means green boys who've never fought a ratling don't get to feast away spring while my people die for their sake."

"Levant will gobble up at least Orense," Cordelia assessed clinically. "Likely Segovia as well. Tenerife will become either one of the Free Cities or a dependency of Helike. The Dread Empire will take Bayeux and Orne before a decade has passed."

"And why is that our business?" Klaus grunted.

"When the Dead King rouses his armies and crosses the lakes," Cordelia said quietly, "*who stands with us?*"

She met her uncle's eyes.

"When the Chain of Hunger gathers the might for an invasion, who bolsters our strength?" she said.

"We've held them back since before there was a Principate," her uncle replied.

"We turned them a way as a nation that spreads from here to Valencis," Cordelia said. "That is why Procer exists, Uncle. Because Triumphant slaughtered so many of us we had to band together as a nation or see ourselves devoured by our neighbours."

"So now you want us to bleed for some princeling in silk," Klaus said bitterly. "That's always the way, isn't it? The south makes a mess and we foot the bill."

There was a truth in that, and for all that Cordelia had eschewed many of her people's customs she was not beyond feeling that bitterness herself. Was she to entrust the fate of her people to a grasping idiot like the Prince of Lange? To the Princess of Aquitan, who would rather take Praesi gold than bow her head for the sake of the Principate?

"No," she said. "Not this time."

"Cordelia?" her uncle said.

Cordelia Hasenbach felt serenity take hold of her, for the first time in years. Her path was clear, finally. *If no one else, then I.*

"Send messengers," she ordered. "To every tower, every hold, every fortress. We gather for war. Anyone we can afford to take from the defences comes with us."

The greying man frowned.

"And who do we fight for?"

"The First Prince of Procer," she said. "Cordelia Hasenbach, first of her name."

Gods save them all, but she would salvage a nation out of this madness. No matter the cost.

Usurpation

"One hundred and forty-three: do not try to avert prophecy, fulfil prophecy or in any way tinker with prophecy. Swallowing poison will lead to a quicker death and less ironic horror inflicted upon Creation."

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

Kairos was twelve years old and he had less than a year to live.

That was what he'd learned today, going down to the crypt even though he had been forbidden to by the king. The... thing in the tomb had spoken its prophecy in a croaky whisper, that he would not make it to his thirteenth nameday. He wished he could say he was surprised, but had anything ever been more obvious? He'd been born frail, with a dead eye and limbs that shook. Ripped from his mother's womb too early when her pregnancy had turned sour and she'd begun withering like grapes on the vine. The priests and the mages had said he wouldn't survive his first winter and his father had washed his hands of the matter, putting him in a distant wing of the palace and drinking all thought of the matter away. But Kairos was still dragging his crippled hide around the city to this day, a prince of the blood no one would look in the eye. Royal or not, he was a pariah. Misfortune had touched him young and never let go, they said. *Bad seed*. That was what happened when kings wed commoners, even for love.

The odd-eyed child closed the door after dismissing the servant, kneeling with shaking legs by the bowl. Dipping a cloth in the warm water, he wiped away the dust and dirt from his face before resting his head on the table. Kairos exhaled, his breath unsteady. His lungs had not been entirely formed when he'd been born, the priests told him. It was why sometimes he choked on his own spit, clawing at his throat until a God as cruel as it was merciful returned his breath to him. Those same priests urged him to entrust his life to the Gods Above, to seek relief in the life after this one. Until then, he should find solace in prayer and good deeds: those would not soothe his body, but they would wash away his sins. They never said exactly what sin he *had* committed. Presumably being born was bad enough there was no need to belabour the matter. The cripple laughed quietly, though a rasping cough killed the mirth halfway through. His knees felt like they were swelling already, but he stayed kneeling.

He clasped his hands and tried to clear his mind, to let the words of the House of Light fill it. Nothing came. Staring down into the bowl, Kairos sighed.

"I am trying," he told the Heavens," to find a reason to worship you. Any reason at all."

His distorted reflection stared back, the blood-filled dead eye made even more monstrous by the water.

"There's a place beyond the Heavens where righteous souls go, your people tell me," he said. "A paradise of sorts, from which no one has ever returned. A reward for those who embrace the seventeen cardinal virtues while living out their allotted time on Creation."

Idly, he flicked the side of the bowl. His kneecaps throbbed painfully but Kairos was no stranger to pain. It was an old friend, the teacher that had reared him from the cradle and followed him in every misshapen step he took. The water rippled, turning his reflection from ugly to abstract.

"It has tempted me, on occasion," he said. "The thought of a place without suffering. I have to wonder, though – what would I even do there?"

He chuckled.

"Sing your praises, rejoice with all the other worthy souls?" he said. "Tell me, o Gods Above – what should I praise you for?"

Silence answered him. It always did. Even in the heart of the House of Light, where Dorian said he could almost hear the singing of the Choirs, he was given only silence. Even the Heavens played favourites. Hesitant knocks at the door roused him from his thoughts.

"Enter," the child said.

A servant, head shaved as was tradition and in white robes that hid their gender, knelt by the open door.

"Prince Kairos," they said. "The king sends for you."

The cripple shakily rose to his feet, leaning heavily against the table.

"I am feeling ill," he replied. "Tell my father I am unable to attend him."

Two men came by the doorway, decked in the ornate bronze armour of the palace guard. Had their swords ever seen any use, Kairos wondered? Doubtful. All the real soldiers went into the army.

"The king insists, my prince," one of them said.

"Does he, now?" the cripple said. "I'll spare all of us the indignity of you getting me there slung over your shoulder."

Knees throbbing, Kairos followed them into the corridors. The servant stayed kneeling until he was gone. The walk was long, by his standards, and made worse by his exertions of the day. His chambers were in the oldest part of the palace, the one that had once been the heart of the fortress when Helike was little more than a castle with huts around it, but this section was all marble and gold. Frescoes of kings and Tyrants spread colourfully along the walls, all depicting the many victories of the city's warlike rulers. That never ceased to amuse him. His father had never wielded a sword in his life, or even ridden a horse. The few skirmishes with Stygia and Atalante that had taken place in his lifetime had been overseen by one of the many generals cluttering the palace, which while blatant parasites at least knew their way around a battlefield. The line of Theodosius was sinking further down the wine barrel every year.

They did not head for the Great Hall. While it was the place where audiences such as this should take place, the king rarely left his parlour unless he had to. The place had grown when the adjoining chambers had seen their walls knocked down to make room for more seats and a direct route to both the cellars and the palace kitchen. What little business was still conducted by Helike's royal line instead of being tossed into the hands of councillors happened there, more often than not. Kairos had only ever stepped foot into the room a handful of times. He was not invited to the courtly games and drinking binges that took place behind those doors. He would not have attended even if he had been: there were few things fouler to look at than a man deep in his cups. The obnoxious laughter always made him think thoughts the Heavens would frown upon.

The guards were still flanking him when he limped into the parlour. The room was half-full, which still meant almost a hundred people. The King of Helike was on a long couch full of cushions and courtesans, a cup of wine in hand and chuckling as he fed one a piece of honeyed plum. The sexagenarian had kept a full head of hair, though gone white, and his face still kept the remains of the handsomeness of his youth. For a man who spent most of his time feasting, he was not all that fat. His face was red, though. Wine took its toll. The rest of the parlour was arranged in a half-circle of couches all turned towards the free space in the centre. Usually, it was filled with dancers, musicians and other performers but today all it had to offer was Kairos' crippled form. A disappointment, no doubt. The couches closest to the king were filled with sycophants and nobles, but the wings of the half-circle on both sides effectively made up the heart of Helike's ruling class. To the left, the most powerful nobles and the most influential generals formed a sober and uncomfortable cluster. All of them were looking at him.

To the right were Dorian and his cronies. Many were sons and daughters to the very same people across them, but there were

others. Priests, even a member of the Order of the Righteous Spear. The heir to Helike himself looked like a living statue. Perfect pale skin unmarred by his hours in the sun, long flowing golden locks that cascaded down his shoulders. Kairos' nephew had that peculiar sort of vanity where he refused to style himself, preferring to awe people with his natural good looks. The other prince was tall and perfectly proportioned, talented with a sword and lance. A famed horseman and promising commander, fair-handed in all things and an orator of talent. That hadn't stopped Dorian's father from drunkenly slipping in the baths and breaking his neck, of course. *It used to take half a continent to put us down*, Kairos thought with disgust. *Now all it takes is a wet tile*. The golden-haired prince smiled encouragingly in his uncle's direction. The cripple looked away, limping his way to the couch where the king was finally deigning to notice his presence.

"Kairos," King Amyntas Theodosian greeted him flatly. "You made me wait."

"The shaking of my legs does not bow to decrees," the prince said.

He did not manage to thread as much apology in that as he should have.

"Neither does your head, boy," the king barked. "I forbade you to go into the crypt. Do you deny you disobeyed me?"

"Grandfather," Dorian spoke up. "My uncle is obviously feeling ill. Perhaps this matter could be settled another day?"

Kairos eyed his hand, which was shaking like a leaf. Not, though, out of fear. How strange. When he'd woken this morning, he had been already flinching at the thought of his father's displeasure. Now, looking at the fury painted over the king's face, he could think of only one thing: *what are you going to do, Father? Kill me before I die?* The prince closed his hand, tucked it under his tunic where it could not be seen trembling.

"I do not," he said. "Deny it, that is."

Some part of him wondered if he should have thought this through. Found an excuse, cooked up a scheme to shield him from the king's anger. He hadn't though. He didn't even have a reason for admitting to this. Just morbid curiosity.

"You disobeyed a royal decree," King Amyntas growled. "That is *treason*."

"I suppose it is," Kairos mused. "How tawdry of me, if you'll forgive my language. Still, I'm surprised you only sent for me

now. I left the crypt before dawn came. Were you too drunk until now to hear the report?"

The silence in the room was deafening. Not a single person even dared to breathe.

"Are you *mocking* me, cripple?" his father spat.

"Obviously," the prince replied. "I did try to make it blatant, for your sake."

"I could have you killed for this," the king said, looking almost sober now.

Though no less furious, evidently.

"It will spare me the walk back to my chambers, at least," Kairos said. "By all means, get on with it."

There was a ripple in the parlour, though his words were not the cause of it. Dorian made his way to his side, graceful even in haste, and knelt as a suppliant.

"Grandfather," he said. "My uncle is delirious with pain, that is the only explanation for his words. I implore you, do not make this decision in anger."

The king looked at his precious golden grandson humbling himself against marble and hesitated. *How proud you are, nephew, even on your knees*, Kairos thought. The cripple limped to the closest table and snatched a cup of wine, pouring it out before casually tossing it at the other prince. The bronze made a delightful little bonk as it hit the back of his head before rolling on the floor.

"Get up, Dorian," Kairos said. "Your wretched pity is the worst indignity I've been subjected to today."

Surprise and irritation flickered across that perfect face and Dorian turned towards him. The odd-eyed child drank in the sight of it. It was like finally drinking cool water after years of being parched.

"Uncle-" he began.

"You are more platitude than man," Kairos said. "I want no part of what you peddle."

"You've gone mad, boy," the king said, sounding horrified.

Slowly, the odd-eyed child took out the hand he'd slipped into his tunic. It was, he saw, no longer shaking. He wondered if there was a meaning in that.

"Guards, take him to his quarters," King Amyntas ordered. "Prince Kairos is under house arrest until I decree otherwise."

The men pulled him away roughly under the stares of the entire court, as he continued thoughtfully looking at his hand.

—

His sleep was dreamless and his hours empty. The apothecaries tried to shove half a dozen different remedies down his throat, but he flatly refused to have anything to do with them. He was going to die, soon enough. What little time he had left would not be spent moving from one daze to another. His first visitor was, naturally, Dorian. It was midmorning after he was first put under arrest that the heir to Helike came, followed by that androgynous fanatic of his. The daughter of a fairly prominent noble, he remembered, though he could not recall her name. Slender and short-haired, and the way she could have been either a boy or a girl branded her a servant in his eyes. In Helike it was only they who made a point of surrendering the more obvious trappings of gender. Still, it hardly mattered since she herself hardly mattered. The girl hovered by the entrance when her master entered, leaving only reluctantly when he dismissed her and closed the door. Kairos would give it decent odds she was waiting outside in the corridor.

"Good morning, Uncle," Dorian greeted him, taking the seat across his. "Has your health improved?"

The odd-eyed child put down the cup of water he'd been drinking on the table, shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

"I am twelve years old, and I can tell that girl is in love with you," Kairos said, wrinkling his nose as he ignored the greeting.

"Semia is a dear friend," Dorian replied. "Put no stock in rumours."

"Your kindness is worse than cruelty, nephew," the cripple said.

The golden prince flinched, then mastered himself.

"I've been talking to grandfather," he said. "Your arrest will be revoked soon."

The odd-eyed child raised an eyebrow.

"Why?" he asked.

"Traditionally, all of royal blood are allowed—" Dorian began.

"I mean why did you talk to Father?" Kairos interrupted.

The man looked surprised.

"You are my uncle," he said. "I would not see you punished this way."

"You don't love me, Dorian," the cripple said.

"We're *family*," the prince replied, almost offended.

"So you feel guilt, and go through the motions regardless," Kairos said. "I must admit I find that rather disgusting, if you'll forgive my language."

The heir to Helike looked irritated, then his face softened.

"I understand you're in pain, Kairos," he said. "And frustrated. You've been mistreated ever since you could walk. Grandfather is not the man he used to be, and how you've been treated was... ill-done. It will be different, when I rule. You will not have to be alone anymore."

"No one has ever *disliked* you before, have they Dorian?" the child said, cocking his head to the side. "Not to your face, at least."

"I want to help you, uncle," the golden-haired man said earnestly.

"It's not because you're beautiful, you know," Kairos said. "Or even because so many people love you while they despise the sight of me. It's because you're hollow."

"Pardon?" the other prince said.

"You're not a person, Dorian," the child said. "All you are is an object, moving according to rules not your own. You don't want anything for yourself."

"It is the duty of a ruler to sublimate their selfish desires for the good of his people," the prince replied quietly.

"I am going to die," Kairos smiled. "Sometime soon, I am told. And yet, just with the few moments yesterday in that parlour, I'll have been alive longer than you will be throughout your entire life."

"I made a choice, uncle," Dorian said. "I've been given so many gifts, I owe it to Creation to use them for the sake of others."

"We don't owe anyone anything," Kairos said.

And in that moment, the words coming out of his mouth without thought, he finally understood it all. There was a trap and there was bait. Live according to our rules, the Heavens said. Toil and struggle and die, fritter away your days and you will be rewarded after death. *It doesn't matter what comes after. Only now. All we*

are is what we do. And if you let Gods decided that for you, you're not anyone at all.

"I always admired it, you know," his nephew said. "The way you kept going to the House of Light even if you never got anything from it. Not like I do. It doesn't matter if they say you were born bad, Kairos. You're *trying*, that's what matters."

Dorian leaned forward.

"We are what we do."

"Yes," the boy who would be the Tyrant smiled. "I couldn't agree more."

When the nobles and the generals came that night, cloaked and bearing treason in their eyes, he was still smiling.

Warden I

"May you become the weakest link in the Chain of Hunger."
– Ancient Lycaonese curse

Amadeus lightly tapped the mark on the map spread across the table.

"Aisne," he said. "That's where it'll take place."

The room where the Dark Council usually held session was empty save for him and Alaya, their most accurate map of the Principate spread across the table and cluttered with small figurines representing the armies being deployed. The largest concentration was around the city of Aisne, seat of the principality of the same name. The largest current alliance in Procer was mustering there to meet Cordelia Hasenbach's forces in a pitched battle on the flatlands to northwest. Said battle, in his estimation, would take place within the month. The Lycaonese under Hasenbach didn't have the supplies for a long campaign and the longer the war stretched the more vulnerable their borders.

"Princess Constance had to make that concession for Brabant to swing to her side," he added. "Their prince doesn't want whatever army loses to turn to banditry on his lands afterwards. There's too many fantassins floating around at the moment for anyone to control after the battle."

"The Princess of Aisne has three times Hasenbach's numbers," Alaya noted, sipping a cup of terrible wine in her seat. "Common military doctrine would say she's assured a victory unless she makes a major blunder."

It always amused Amadeus to hear her speak of 'common military doctrine'. It wasn't that the Empress wouldn't make a good field

commander – she had the right instincts, though she'd need seasoning – but rather that Alaya had always left the military matters to him. Most of what she knew about war she knew from books, and Praesi ones at that. The dark-haired man was of the opinion that over half the books on war written in the Empire were worthless when applied to a proper war machine. The Legions of Terror as they currently were had little to do with the unruly hordes that had been the staple of Praes military enterprises for centuries.

"She has the advantage," he conceded. "But not by as large a margin as you'd think. About two thirds of what Aisne and her allies field are levies and fantassins, not professional soldiers."

"Hasenbach has a much smaller population to draw from," Alaya said. "She might have more professionals proportionally, but when it comes to hard numbers her edge is only a few thousands."

"True," Amadeus said calmly. "But she has three factors on her side. First, most of her soldiers are Lycaonese."

"And so they've seen battle before," Alaya frowned.

"It's more than that," the green-eyed man said. "The force that presses at their borders is the Chain of Hunger. Ratlings are weaker than humans on average, unless they've had a few decades to grow, and they've no true siege weaponry save for the Ancient Ones. What they do have, however, is *numbers*."

It was a very rare thing for him to have to spell out anything to Alaya, and this was no exception.

"They're used to being outnumbered," the Soninke said.

"And in the fights they get in, retreat is not an option," Amadeus said. "They won't flinch when the casualties rise. Princess Constance's soldiers will. Wars in the south of Procer just aren't fought the way they are up north."

The Empress sipped at her drink, mulling it over.

"The second advantage would be the Augur," she said.

Amadeus nodded.

"Hasenbach's army will know where and when the enemy will move. She showed against Lange exactly how dangerous that can be," he said.

By the time the Lycaonese had moved to siege the city, Prince Dagobert effectively had no army. His troops had suffered three ambushes in a row, then a series of brutal night raids that butchered his best soldiers before they could fight. The Prince

of Lyonis turned on him immediately and the Princess of Segovia was entertaining envoys from Hasenbach in her tent even as the city gates were being breached, her army watching passively. With Brus having capitulated within a month of the Lycaonese offensive beginning, that had brought four southern principalities to Hasenbach's banner and turned that unknown young girl from the north into the foremost candidate for the title of First Prince. The other rulers of Procer had begun plotting against her before the dust from the last battle had settled, of course. The Princess of Aquitan, who still had backing from most southern principalities even after her repeated defeats, had temporarily joined hands with her hated enemy in Aisne. Between the two of them the coalition spanned a massive eleven principalities and covered almost as much territory as Praes and Callow combined.

"Which leads me to the third factor," Amadeus said. "Klaus Papenheim."

"The Prince of Hannover," Alaya murmured. "Her uncle."

"Without contest the best general in Procer," the green-eyed man said. "In terms of skill I'd rank him below Grem, but he's the most experienced living commander on Calernia."

A distinction always worth making, considering the existence of the Dead King.

"Hasenbach winning is the worst outcome for us, Maddie," Alaya said. "She's purged most of our agents out of her sphere of influence, but more importantly she's fighting the *right* kind of war. She kills princes but spares commoners, her armies don't pillage or burn fields. Wherever she goes, she knits Procer back together."

While if the coalition led by the Princesses Constance and Aenor won, it would immediately collapse into infighting as soon as the larger threat was dealt with. Maybe even before. The women detested each other personally as well as politically, and with Dagobert of Lange out of the running they were itching to have a go at each other with their other borders secure.

"I give her better than half chances of winning at Aisne, as it stands," Amadeus said. "I take it you've infiltrated the coalition?"

"I've applied pressure to keep it together," Alaya agreed. "And I've been working on Hasenbach's southern allies. Not all of them are steady."

"If one of her flanks turns on her in the middle of the battle she's done," Amadeus noted. "Not even Papenheim could turn that around when outnumbered by this much."

Alaya set aside her cup and rose to her feet, running a finger along the border between Callow and Procer.

"As long as the Principate is united, the Empire is threatened," Malicia said. "Let's make sure it doesn't come to that."

—

Mornings this far south were indolent things, in Klaus' opinion.

In Hannover there would be mist and biting cold keeping his men awake, but down here the lazy heat of summer was trying to drag them all back to sleep. No wonder the Alamans had no stomach for real war. Their land was soft and had made them soft in turn. So they'd turned to drinking and scheming instead of doing their duty, once more making a fucking mess of Procer until the Lycaonese came south to clean up their godsdamned mess. It made his blood boil, that this band of shit-eating buffoons had somehow managed to wage war for over a decade without one of their fat arses somehow managing to claim the throne. Made him want to thin the herd a bit so that the next generation would remember that if they kept pissing the bed until Klaus' people had to step in there would be a price to pay. Cordelia had told him not to, though. Said they'd need the Alamans and the Arlesites in years to come and that filling a few mass graves with the arrogant twats would burn those bridges. Klaus had informed her that the day he needed an Alamans to defend the walls of Hannover was the day he began a hike to Keter, but she'd talked him around. Somehow.

That was the thing with his niece: you start a conversation with her knowing the sky was blue and an hour later come out of that room willing to start a war over the fact it was green, never able to pinpoint exactly *when* she'd convinced you. It just... happened. At least it worked on other people too. The Prince of Brus had gone from being invaded to putting a rapier through a man's belly for implying she was not the rightful First Prince in the span of a single month. The boy who now ruled Lange was eating out of her palm even after watching his own uncle sent to the headsman's block at her orders. Klaus had always known Margaret's child was meant for greater things. His sister had been a cast-iron bitch that scared the shit out of even the ratlings, but she'd always been meant for a soldier's life. She'd died spitting in the eye of the Plague, as the line of Papenheim had since times immemorial, but she would not have been able to lead the Lycaonese the way her daughter did.

There'd been some who looked down on his niece when she'd been a young girl, because she wasn't much of a fighter. Because she cared for etiquette, because she corresponded with Alamans princes and dressed in skirts instead of mail. All of those were eating their words now, watching Cordelia spin the heads of the southerners and beat them at their own game. His niece had

learned their ways and she was not turning them against the arrogant princelings with a cold ruthlessness that would have made her mother proud. Not all their allies were so impressed, though. Cordelia had two princes firmly in hand, but Luisa of Segovia was a wily old fox who'd switch sides the moment she got a better offer. *Segovians*, he thought with distaste. They had such a hard on for coin they might as well be Ashurans. As for the Prince of Lyonis, he knew so little about loyalty he probably wouldn't know how to spell the word. That was the one they had to watch for betrayal, when the time came.

Klaus broke off a piece of bread and thoughtfully chewed it, watching the field. He was never all that hungry before the killing began, as it happened. He broke off another piece and fed it to his horse, who licked his palm in appreciation. Ratbiter was getting a little old as well, he thought. The days where the destrier dutifully trampled whoever was in his way would soon be over. Tossing away the rest of the bread and washing away the taste with water, Klaus affectionately slapped the animal's neck.

"We've still got another few in us, don't we old boy?" the greying general said.

The horse whinnied and the prince smiled grimly. The alliance opposing them was getting ready around Lange, but he had no intention of waiting until they were ready to strike. Princess Constance was still moving in supplies to feed her horde of fuckups and the Augur had told him where and when to strike. The general adjusted his helm and unsheathed his sword, silently watching the column of horse-drawn carriages lumbering north to Aisne. They wouldn't have expected him to move through Salia with his cavalry, he knew. Salia, as the future seat of the First Prince, had remained neutral so far. Until Cordelia had negotiated passage for him. The rest of his army was still crossing the south of Brabant, loud and visible and drawing attention. Klaus turned to his ranks of horsemen and offered them a wolf's grin.

"All right, boys and girls," he called out. "It seems fucking Dagobert up the arse didn't get our message across. Those two sweet princesses are going to need a repeat performance before it sinks in, my darlings. So make sure that smoke can be seen all the way from Aisne, you hear me?"

Their call back was deafening. Feeling twenty years younger, Klaus Papenheim brought up his shield and *charged*.

—

"He'll win," the Augur said. "On all paths, he wins."

Cordelia mandated court dress for all her attendants, even the Lycaonese, but her distant cousin Agnes was something of an

exception. Named, after all, lived according to their own rules. Heroes were rare in Procer, at best a once in a generation appearance, and they were treated with distant awe. By most, at least. Soldiers tended to be sceptical of them, given that the Principate had face both heroes and a handful of villains in battle and come off the better without any Named of its own. There was an institutional contempt for nations like Callow who relied on heroes to fight the enemy, and when Praes had successfully invaded the country there'd been many who'd shaken their heads and said it was an inevitable outcome for a kingdom who relied on the Heavens for protection. Which was absurd, in her opinion, since Callow had to deal with all-powerful madmen who could burn cities with a single spell while the Principate dealt mostly with mundane armies. Regardless, a Named like the Augur commanded respect from even seasoned generals.

It had been illuminating, seeing the change in how people treated her cousin. Agnes had been a lonely child and then a lonely girl, thought odd by most for her awkwardness and endless enthusiasm for bird watching. While never bullied – she was a Hasenbach, however distant from the main line – she'd been avoided. Cordelia herself had been one of the few people to make a point of spending time with her, though they never had much in common. They were blood regardless, and so she'd always made time for her cousin when her duties allowed. And then one day Agnes had casually predicted a ratling raid at dinner, absent-mindedly referring to herself as the Augur. Overnight people began bowing to her and seeking her advice, to her confusion. She'd shied away to the attention and been extremely grateful when Cordelia set aside one of the few ornamental gardens in Rhenia for her, spending her days sitting in her chair and watching the sky. Always distant, Agnes had become almost otherworldly: the cares of Creation passed her by, and even when speaking with people she seemed distracted.

The gifts of the Heavens always came at a cost, Cordelia knew.

"Does he come back safely?" the blonde asked.

Agnes nodded.

"Hawks to the east, flocking," she said.

Cordelia patted her cousin's hand gently.

"I do not know what that means, Agnes," she said.

"Oh," the Augur blinked owlishly. "The Empress waits. She has knives for you."

As expected. Malicia still had a hand to play. That she would be backing Aisne and Aequitan was a given, but the Dread Empress of Praes always had more than a single scheme at play. She'd be

targeting the weak points of Cordelia's own alliance, Segovia and Lyonis. The Prince of Lyonis was the most openly treacherous of the two, never having forgotten that he'd been a contender for the throne when he'd had his relatives in Cleves and Hainaut behind him. Princess Luisa, though, was where Cordelia thought the betrayal would come from. She had too many merchant interests, too many ways for the Empire to reward her changing sides. She'd already prepared for the eventuality, placed safeguards to remove her from play if she acted. It would have been a relief, she thought, if Procerans were all she had to deal with. But that would be a naïve expectation: all of Calernia had a vested interest in the outcome of this civil war. Praes most of all, for they had engineered it, but the other vultures were circling.

It was only a matter of time until the Dominion of Levant began eyeing the exhausted and impoverished principalities of the south. And when they began to move, everyone else would. Helike was quiet for now, its king kept occupied by gifts of gold and dancers from the Princess of Tenerife, but that would not last forever. The Free City had declined in influence too much of late, and those were the tell-tale signs of a Tyrant rising. The Chain of Hunger had not troubled Lycaonese borders overmuch, but eventually the rattlings smell weakness on the walls and assault in force. Cordelia had stripped the strength of her people bare for the war in the south, knowing the risks it entailed. She could not afford a long war, two years at most of which she had already spent half. She had to end things in Aisne so her people could return north as soon as possible, for if the princesses of Aequitan and Aisne survived this blow the fighting could stretch on for years.

A gamble, then. Cordelia had always disliked those. It felt like making light of the lives she was responsible for to risk them imprudently, but what else could she do? If she did nothing Procer would collapse. If any of the rulers aiming for the throne had any vision at all she could have supported them instead of struck out on her own, but as things stood? She'd warned them all of who stood behind the Pravus Banks, and still they took the gold. Because if they didn't, their rivals might and they'd lose an advantage.

"Do you think it had to be this way, Agnes?" she asked quietly.

Her cousin glanced at her, then smiled.

"There's a lot of people who ask me things, Cordelia," she said. "Do you know why you're the only one I always answer?"

The Prince of Rhenia shook her head.

"Because you do what you think you need to do, not what you want," the Augur said. "That's why you're worth helping, even if it's tedious."

Cordelia sat next to her cousin in the morning sun, looking at the sky for a long time. Eventually she closed her eyes. She had planned all she could, she knew. All she could hope now was that she had, this once, planned better than the woman trying to destroy Procer.

Warden II

"There's only a thousand of them, I don't care if they're on a hill. This will be over by midday, Black Knight, mark my words."
– Dread Empress Sulphurous, the Technically Correct

As midnight neared, two women on opposite sides of the same continent found themselves looking up at the sky at the same time by Fate or coincidence.

Dread Empress Malicia, First of Her Name, tugged her modest cotton nightgown closer together and watched the crescent moon from her rooms above the clouds, near the summit of the Tower. Soninke called it Sorcerous' Grin, for the eldritch rituals the Emperor had concocted in its light had not been seen since the days of the Miezans. Some said a sliver of the man was still up there, scheming his escape from death.

Cordelia Hasenbach, claimant to the throne of Procer, had been looking through one of the few windows in Rhenia's main hall for hours. She'd seen the moon rise, and thought it fitting. Lycaonese soldiers called it the Ratbane: the crescent in the sky heralded the beginning of the fight to crush the ratling warbands that crossed the northern rivers every month. There would be blood, soon. The fate of Procer demanded it.

Neither of them would find sleep that night. Malicia quietly poured herself a cup of truly terrible wine, the taste of it bittersweet. Cordelia stirred the embers in the fireplace with an iron poker and eyed the dancing red motes, her mind faraway.

In Aisne, the game began.

—

This would haunt her until the day she died, Therese knew. The foulness of what she had to do would be a lash on her back for the rest of her life. But what choice did she have? They had her wife. They had her *children*. The Lycaonese woman crept softly to Klaus Papenheim's tent, where a single candle still burned. Twenty years, she'd fought for the prince. She'd followed him unflinchingly when he'd charged two hundred cataphracts into the

meat of a ratling army of thousands, backwhen the Longtooth Lord had tried to breach the walls of Hannoven. She'd pulled him out of the mouth of an Ancient One when the tower-sized monstrous rat had been about to bite clean through his plate, the year after. She'd gone through a hundred battles and skirmishes at his side, fighting for a duty no one south of Neustria would ever understand.

And now she was going to murder him her prince in cold blood. The tent's flap parted silently under her hand and she reached for her knife with a knot in her throat, the knowledge of what she was about to do like ashes in her mouth. There was a single lit candle at the table, Therese saw with a blink of surprise, but no sign of Prince Klaus himself. Not at the table, and not in his bed. The first stroke of the sword took her in the back of the knee and she fell with a grunt of pain. Looking up she saw two old comrades, soldiers she'd bled with, looking down at her with grief. One kicked the knife out of her hands and she did not attempt to get up.

"I'm sorry, Therese," one said.

"So am I," she said, and closed her eyes.

She had failed. Would they kill her family anyway? Maybe not, if she died for this. She heard the blade come down, and she almost smiled. The Enemy had worked through her but found House Hasenbach ready for them. There was satisfaction in that.

"And Yet We Stand," she whispered, a heartbeat before the sword took her life.

—

He would not be remembered as a hero, Louis knew. By taking one life tonight he would save tens of thousands tomorrow, but he would win no praise for it. His name would be a byword for treachery for decades, the servant who had turned on his mistress at the behest of her enemy. He knew this, but still he carried the dagger under his clothes. He had no wife, no children, but he did have a sister. Barely more than a child, the sweetest little girl. And he'd known, when the First Prince's man had come to him, what kind of Procer he wanted her to grow up in. Not one where anyone old enough to bear a weapon was handed a pike and sent to the grinder. Not one where armies roamed the land, burning everything as they passed while their rulers spent lives they should be guarding like coppers. He could make a better world, and he would. Not matter the cost.

Princess Constance of Aisne would be deep in slumber: the wine she'd indulged in would make sure she did not stir. Louis slipped in through the servant entrance and stepped quietly into his ruler's chambers. The tall glass doors leading to the balcony

were open, pale drapes fluttering in the wind as the moon's light coated everything in a soft glow. The princess' body was wrapped in her covers, her lover of the month pressed close. Both still asleep. Taking out the knife, Louis let out a soft breath. He could do this. He had to. He was already nervous and froze when he glimpsed two silhouettes from the corner of his eye, though he relaxed when they did not move. They were... two other servants. Dead, their throats slit and blood dripping onto their clothes. One corpse's hands had been angled to cover his eyes, the other's her eyes. *What?*

The last thing Louis ever felt was a blade opening his throat in perfect silence.

—

Jacques was set for life, after this. A single night's work and he would live like a prince for the rest of his days. He supposed what he'd been told to do was treason, but what the fuck did *he* care? Treason was for crowned heads to debate. Fantassins like him were just meant to die obediently while the owners of Procer traded a few acres of land still covered in blood, keeping it for maybe a decade. Then the call came again, sons dying for the exact same godsdamned acres their fathers had: no one won at this game save for the princes, and he was fucking sick of it. He'd been offered a way out, a real future, and he was going to take it. They weren't asking anything he wasn't glad to do, anyway. The Prince of Brus might be suckling at the Hasenbach tit, nowadays, but some of Jacques' friends had died keeping the savages out of their land. He had not forgotten that, unlike their cockless wonder of a prince.

A few free drinks had been enough for him to learn when the patrols would go by, and any idiot could get his hands on a torch. The Lycaonese restricted use of fire on campaign, but their writ ran no further than their own camps. The presumptuous bastards were outnumbered by Alamans already, and after tomorrow the gap would widen further. Good riddance. Let them crawl back to their barren wasteland of a home and resume mating with ratlings. The torch in his hand was dripping oil, so it had been a good notion to wrap his hand with a cloth first. The fantassin didn't bother to try to break padlock on the granary, instead taking a step back and pressing his torch against the wooden wall until it caught fire. He did the same on the three others before tossing away his torch and making his exit. Screams of alarm spread eventually, but far too late. The grain would burn. Let the fucking Lycaonese dine on the ashes.

Jacques whistled as he returned to his tent, already thinking of the nice little shop he was going to open in Brus when all this mess settled down.

—

Annette's hands were shaking. She hated doing this, she really did. The horses hadn't done anything to anyone. They were innocent, and no matter what the House of Light said she wasn't convinced they didn't have souls. They were such wonderful creatures, so gentle and affectionate if you had a way with them. Annette did, as her father before her, though unlike him she'd not become the stablemaster for the Princess of Aquitan. The others respected her know how, though. She was the one they went to, when one of the horses got sick and no one knew why. Even mages listened when she spoke. They'd be waking her up before dawn, she thought, to ask her to treat the very wrong she was about to commit. If only there was another way! But there wasn't, and she must. For love.

She still couldn't believe a man like Antoine had fallen for her. He was a servant too, of course, but part of the household of the Prince of Cantal. Not a muckabout like her. You could see it just by the way he talked, the way he dressed so cleanly and wore his elegantly styled beard. They'd been together for two months now, and after the war they would get married. He'd promised, and he wouldn't have gotten her those white roses if he didn't mean it. But now some wicked person was threatening his life unless he did an equally wicked thing, and doing it so *unreasonably*. There was no way Antoine could have gotten to the Princess of Aquitan's horses, her guards beat anyone who even got close. But Annette could.

Her shaking hands poured the exact number of drops she was supposed to into the trough before moving on to the next one, the translucent liquid disappearing without a trace in the water.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to the horses. "But they'll kill him if I don't."

—

Lucien Hauteville, chief cook for the army of the Princess of Segovia, was not in fact called this at all. He'd been born Jacob of Satus, though he'd left both the name and the faint Praesi accent behind when he'd joined the Eyes of the Empire. He wasn't technically one of those anymore, having long ago graduated from skulking in taverns with a compromising tattoo on his arm while the real agents did the work. Having survived his infiltration of a resistance group in Denier, he'd been raised from the ranks at the order of Webweaver herself and sent to Procer. That had been decades ago, when the Conquest was still fresh. He'd dug deep roots in Segovia since, married and become a respectable member of the Princess' household. And never had he ceased sliding a monthly detailed report between two loose stones outside the palace for another agent to pick up.

One did not cross the likes of the Lady Scribe, no matter how comfortable abroad one became. Unlike the Carrion Lord, the

Webweaver would not crucify you: you'd just suddenly... disappear, along with everyone you ever cared about. Besides, if he was careful he could maintain his cover and return to Segovia after this. It'd been a while since he'd carved up anyone, though he'd once had a talent for it, so it was for the best that the task he'd been given was slightly more indirect. Princess Luisa's highest-ranked commanders had a habit of unofficially gathering for drinks and wakeleaf on pleasant evenings, and had not broken the pattern even on this campaign. That was the kind of target of opportunity an Eye would never outgrow sinking their teeth into.

Jacob silently barred the door of peasant house the officers had commandeered, smiling at the sound of raucous laughter coming from inside. He splashed oil over the wood, then selected another five places around the house to help the fire get started. Humming under his breath, he struck a pinewood match and set the first point ablaze. They didn't notice until he was getting started on the fourth – too drunk, he thought – and by then they were as good as dead. Ignoring the panicked screaming and the desperate attempts to hack through the door, Jacob finished his work and melted into the darkness. The smell of cooking flesh on the wind brought fond memories, but also ideas. Pork for supper tomorrow, perhaps? He'd recently learned to make Levantine sauce, with the little peppers. He'd ask Princess Luisa.

—

When dawn came, two women on opposite sides of the same continent broke their fast with parchment laid out in front of them. Reports, one set received through messenger pigeons and the other through an elaborate scrying relay.

Dread Empress Malicia allowed herself a smile, as she was alone in the dining room. Princess Constance of Aisne was still alive and the coalition held. A victory, mitigated only by the horses of the Princess of Aquitan's entire cataphract contingent being poisoned. Assassinating Klaus Papenheim would have been a coup, but she had never thought the attempt likely to succeed. And with a third of their supplies gone, Hasenbach's armies would be forced to give battle soon. With one of their flanks shaky, as the senior staff of the Princess of Segovia had quite literally gone up in smoke.

Prince Cordelia Hasenbach frowned at the letters in front of her, delicately eating a spoonful of broth as her attendants stood silent. Aquitan had been significantly weakened, but aside from that she'd failed to make an effect. Her most important victories had been defensive in nature, protecting her forces instead of weakening her enemy's. The loss of the granaries was not a major setback, she decided, as Uncle Klaus had intended on giving battle soon, but it meant retreat was no longer a feasible option

even if necessary. This round, she silently conceded, went to the Empress.

In Aisne, the game continued.

—

By Klaus' reckoning, the Battle of Aisne begun when the enemy caught sight of his outriders on the plains to the northwest of the city. His boys had immediately retreated when the coalition had sent out a larger cavalry force after them, but by then the horns had been sounded. The massive armies of the two reluctantly allied princesses begun their lumbering march to the battlefield, even as the Prince of Hannover's own soldiers spread into formation. It was nearing noon when the enemy arrived, and by then Klaus had arranged his forces in a broad forward triangle.

To the surprise of the coalition, the centre of his formation was not made out of Lycaonese infantry but of the armies of Lyonis and Segovia, themselves bordered by Brus and Lange while his northerners formed the wings on both sides. From atop his horse, the Prince of Hannover watched mockery erupt among the staff of the Princess of Aisne.

They probably thought that he'd positioned the troops that way because he believed that Lyonis and Segovia would run at the first opportunity if not flanked by more loyal armies. He would have believed the same, in their place. Messengers immediately began going back and forth between the armies of the princesses of Aisne and Aquitan, and he knew exactly what they'd be talking about. Instead of a thick battering ram, the commanders in both armies would be arguing in favour of spreading out coalition lines so that they could envelop Klaus' smaller army. It was the best way to make their superior numbers count. *Now we see if you were right, Cordelia.* Another hour passed and then the coalition army began moving forward as they'd been, to the grey-haired man's dark amusement. His niece had read the opposition like a book.

Neither princess, in the end, was willing to allow the other one's armies too far from her sight. There was always the risk that the other ruler would delay the attack on their flank just long enough that the other racked up the most casualties, only striking after Klaus' formation was already broken. They already thought victory was in the bag, he realized, so they were planning for the aftermath. There was a decent chance that a second pitched battle would erupt the moment his army was scattered, between the two 'allied' princesses. An old Alamans proverb that came to mind: *victors should not offer their back to the door.* Just after your enemy had won was the best time to slide in the knife. Even if spreading out would have been better tactics, politics were making them stupid. And the wretches wondered why there was a need for a Lycaonese on the throne.

The Prince of Hannover watched the enemy infantry advance for some time, then glanced north. Both Klaus and the coalition had massed their cavalry into a single force and sent it to the side, as had been the norm in Proceran warfare since the days of Isabella the Mad. The coalition cavalry, trusting in their larger numbers – though that advantage had shrunk somewhat with Aquitan's horses being poisoned, something that still had the old soldier grinning – moved forward first. The two masses met in furious charge to the side the main armies, and for the first time that day the difference between Lycaonese and southern warfare was made clear. In Alamans and Arlesites wars, cataphracts either fought other cataphracts or ran down infantry out of formation. Mobility was key, and so light armour was favoured. Lycaonese cataphracts, on the other hand, fought against rattlings. The barbed arrows and spears used by the Chain of Hunger, which were often poisoned as well, meant that plate armour had become the standard.

When the cavalries impacted it was a massacre. His Lycaonese horsemen tore straight through the tip of the enemy wedge before beginning to slow, and in close quarters the gap between plate and chain mail took its toll. The melee lasted for the better part of an hour until the coalition cavalry broke and fled, having lost perhaps a third of their number. Klaus doubted they would be seen again for the rest of the engagement, though he'd keep eyes on them just in case.

The sight must have been a shock to the princesses of Aisne and Aquitan, he decided, but now it would not be enough to give them pause. The two princesses were smelling a victory right now. When the ranks of infantry had met the sound of shield walls colliding was like thunder, but after an initial valiant effort by the centre of Klaus' formation the sheer mass of the coalition army began to push the soldiers of Lyonis and Segovia back. That impact reverberated until it turned into an actual retreat, the arranged triangle of his formation slowly caving inwards. All that, he had planned for. He kept a close on on the centre since they were the most important part of his strategy. The Segovians, he noted, were fighting like devils. They were making the coalition bleed for every inch as they retreated.

He owed Princess Luisa an apology, it seemed. The old fox was keeping her part of the bargain and more. Slowly his outwards triangle was turning into an arc of the opposite curvature, the Lycaonese he'd placed at the two back wings of the triangle now turning into the tips of the arc as the coalition pushed deeper and deeper. Then the soldiers under the Prince of Lyonis turned their slow retreat into something more like a rout, leaving a hole in the formation, and Klaus cursed loudly.

"Fabien, you weaselling fuck," he said through gritted teeth. "I hope they spit roast you in the Furthest Hell for that."

—

Prince Fabien of Lyonis pressed his horse forward, his troops keeping pace as well as they could. No doubt the old brute from Hannoven was pissing his pants about now. Without Lyonis holding the centre with the Segovians, there was a gaping hole in the centre of Papenheim's formation. Now the coalition would flow into the room, splitting their enemies into two smaller forces and overwhelming them individually. The decision to turn his cloak had been quite easy, as it happened. While his cousins in Cleves and Hainaut were no longer willing or able to support his bid for the throne, his correspondence in Arans had begun yielding results of late. The moment Hasenbach retreated to the mountains with her tail between her legs he could seize Brus and strongarm the boy in Lange into backing him, putting Fabien back at the head of an alliance to rival any of the others.

Both Constance of Aisne and Aenor of Aequitan had offered to pay him for the privilege of becoming their rival, amusingly enough, and securing another loan from the Pravus Bank had been child's play. Whether it was the Praesi furnishing that gold or not ultimately mattered little to him: after he became First Prince he could default on the debt and what would *they* be able to do about it? Invade the Principate to collect? Laughable. It could be argued by that emptying the Empire's coffers he was doing the work of the Heavens, he'd decided. Besides, if he didn't take the coin his enemies would. That kind of an advantage could be enough to bury him even if he was careful. All that was left, he thought, was to decide whether or not the army of Lyonis would strike the soldiers of Lange on its way out of the killing field. He was inclined to do so. If he could grab the boy prince, that entire principality was as good as his.

"Brother," he heard from the side.

Ah, Sophie. Still playing the soldier, he saw, with her plate armour and pretty white horse. The youngest of his sisters always did have a fancy for the military life.

"An auspicious day, Sophie," he smiled. "We've just won the Battle of Aisne."

"So I see," the dark-haired girl replied. "Are you sure turning on Hasenbach is wise?"

As their horses pulled side by side, Fabien snorted contemptuously.

"She's a decent hand at the Ebb and Flow, for a Lycaonese," he conceded. "But she's a long way from home. The girl must learn her place."

"I happen to have a notion of where that is," Lady Sophie agreed.

Before he could blink her sword was out of her scabbard and buried in his throat.

"On the throne," his sister said calmly. "The First Prince sends her regards, brother."

Sagging on his horse, the last thing the Prince of Lyonis ever heard was his sister taking command of the army and ordering it back into formation.

—

Prince Etienne of Brabant watched the army of Lyonis fall back into line, and in that moment made his decision. He still believed that Princess Constance would make for a good First Princess, and not just because she'd promised to wed her son to his eldest daughter. She had the connections, the experience and the vision to bring the Principate into a golden age. But he'd been ruminating Hasenbach's letter for months now, and come to the conclusion that the girl was right. It was no longer important *who* took the throne: Procer could not afford to go without a supreme leader anymore. The divides were beginning to run too deep. If he kept supporting the Princess of Aisne, the end of the civil war was nowhere in sight. Aenor of Aequitan had comparable backing and would never bow to a woman she despised so much — but she had no personal enmity with Hasenbach. None of them did.

That was, he supposed, the best reason he could think of for putting the Lycaonese girl on the throne. She would not be an effective First Prince, he thought: she didn't have enough allies among the Alamans and the Arlesites to keep the Highest Assembly in line. But she had just enough backers to be crowned, and with her as a figurehead the healing could begin. Hasenbach was unmarried and had shown no interest in remedying that, so her dynasty need not last longer than a generation. An Alamans could reclaim the throne in a few decades and Procer could move on from these ruinous days. All Etienne had to do for this to come true was betray an ally. *Ah, well*, he thought. *The waters ebb and flow, but the tide is eternal*. There was no changing the nature of this game, harsh as it could be at times. He gestured for his page to sound the clarion.

Coming late to Princess Constance's cause had meant she'd sweetened his alignment with quite a few perks, including the forces of Brabant being positioned to the back of the coalition army. No doubt she'd come to regret that decision now. His army paused, realigned at the exhortations of the serjeants and then charged into the back of the coalition forces. It was only then that he noticed it: in the distance, the Princess of Orne was doing the very same thing. In the span of a few heartbeats, the situation of the two princesses leading the coalition had turned from the eve of victory to the better part of an encirclement.

Just enough of a way out was left that the coalition soldiers would have a path to flee instead of fight to the death, he noted. The Prince of Hannover's experience at work.

Slowly, Papenheim's cataphracts wheeled behind the coalition and formed a wedge, preparing for a charge into the exposed back. *Weeping Heavens*, he thought, all the pieces coming together. *This is going to be a massacre*. Perhaps Hasenbach did have it in her to be more than a figurehead, if she could be this ruthless.

—

Klaus Papenheim had more than a few battles under his belt. The campaign into Lange had seen precious few pitched engagements – ambushes and raids had been the way he'd picked, making use of the Augur's powers to find vulnerable moments – but he'd fought ratlings by the shores of Lake Netzach many a time to prevent them from putting enough warbands together to threaten Hannover. This, though? This was something else. The ranks of the coalition began shrinking until the entire force... crumpled. After sending his cataphracts charging into their backs twice he had to hold the riders back or risk them being swept away by the human torrent of fleeing soldiers. They had orders to make sure neither the princesses of Aisne or Aequitan managed to flee the field, and the veteran knew that before nightfall he'd have both women as prisoners in his camp. The Augur's foretelling of where they'd go had made sure of that.

He might have just ended the Proceran civil war today.

Some principalities would refuse to bend their knees still, but there would be enough rulers backing Cordelia that she could be elected First Prince legally. He'd never really doubted that his niece could do it, could lead them to victory, but there'd always been a sense that the victory was a distant thing. Years ahead, after long and hard struggles. Instead he'd campaigned for a little over a year and the entire south of Procer had burst open like an overripe fruit. The grey-haired man almost shivered. He knew that the Lycaonese armies were not, in the end, overwhelmingly stronger than those of the Alamans and Arlesites. They had advantages, but so did the southerners. For the first time he truly realized what Cordelia meant, when she'd said that the Empress was in the process of destroying Procer. *She was making us brittle, beyond repair, and no one had even noticed*.

Prince Klaus Papenheim found his gaze turning to the east, where in the distance the shape of the tall mountains separating the Principate from Callow could almost be glimpsed. This wasn't over. Not even close to it.

—

When nightfall came, two women on opposite sides of the continent found themselves looking down at hastily-brought reports.

Cordelia Hasenbach, now First Prince of Procer in all but name, put the sheaf of parchment down and allowed herself to savour the feeling for a moment. She'd won. By the skin of her teeth, but she had won. She'd proved that a mere mortal could take on the all-seeing monster in the Tower and come out ahead. The Principate was not dead and Calernia would not sink into anarchy. Then the moment passed, and the Prince of Rhenia composed herself. There was work to do. There would always be work to do, and more now than ever before.

Dread Empress Malicia's face remained serene even as she put aside the letter and rose to her feet. Contingencies would have to be implemented. The throne could not be denied to Hasenbach, but it could be weakened. The dark-skinned woman came to stand by an old shatranj board, her Name glimpsing the shivering souls that Dread Emperor Sorcerous had bound to the pieces.

"This one goes to you, darling," she murmured. "Shall we play another?"

Without waiting for a reply, she nudged forward a pawn.

Raid

"Though goblins are the most secretive of all peoples, audiences with Matrons granted me some insight into their people. The Tribes have no true concept of war because there is no such thing as peace, to a goblin – only the temporary withholding of violence."

– Extract from "Horrors and Wonders", famed travelogue of Anabas the Ashuran

There was nothing quite like a spot of murder to get the blood going in the morning. There weren't any proper roads this close to the southern Marchford hills, but there was a dirt path wide enough for carts to take. Special Tribune Robber's detached cohort had never set an ambush there before: it had been easier to catch them close to Dormer previously, but since that whole region had gone up into literal flames he'd had to readjust. The Wasteland was bleeding people and wealth like a slow fucking raider, and all the meat was headed for Liesse. Not a week past he'd watched a full thousand Taghreb household troops march to Heiress' – well, Diabolist now if the rumours were to be believed – stronghold in an orderly column. That had been too much of a mouthful for his people to swallow, though he'd had the wells ahead of them poisoned as a 'welcome to Callow' present. They'd get a few corpses out of it before wising up and sticking to their own supplies.

This particular bunch was more in his wheelhouse. Only a hundred of them, though his scouts said they were heavy on the mages. That was fine. The Tribes had not gone through seven goblin rebellions without learning how to deal with those, even before the War College had shoved anti-caster doctrine down his trousers. *Hit first, hit hard and mess with the field of vision.* Robber's cohort had been lying in wait for half the night, and now that dawn had broken the Praesi were on the move again. Five carts, dragged by oxen. Hard to tell what was inside with the cloths over the loads, but the last two they'd caught had been full of stone and metals. What the Diabolist wanted those for was anyone's guess, but to the yellow-eyed tribune it smelled of a flying fortress. He kind of hoped it was. Not only would it mean he'd get to assault one of those before the year was out, it would also solve the Boss' refugee problem.

Call him a cynic, but he doubted the Diabolist had let all of those people into Liesse out of the goodness of her Wastelander heart. They might as well have 'ritual fuel' branded onto their foreheads.

All of his raiders were old hands at this by now, so there was no need for him to give any orders. The tribune remained pressed into the ground, his form covered with grass and leaves. Most of the time putting soldiers on both sides of the road meant you were a fucking amateur commander and losing a few of your own to crossfire, but his people weren't greenhorns. They wouldn't blindly volley into the mass: his cohort wasn't rich enough in ammunition to afford not picking its targets. Wide unblinking eyes watching the Praesi approach, Robber silently counted down until the fun began. Just as the middle of the procession hit the ground they'd picked, Captain Clipper whistled and the demolition charges blew. Lieutenant Rattler had dug underneath the path during the night to place them. By the looks of it, she'd flavoured the mix with a few smokers. Robber approved, it was a vicious little twist on the usual recipe: even as the oxen panicked, three patches of billowing toxic smoke spread along the enemy column.

"KILL THEM!" Robber called out, rising to his feet.

"TAKE THEIR STUFF!" the call came back.

The Praesi just screamed, which wasn't anywhere as snappy. Bad form, the goblin mused. Even the usual yells of *you can't do this* or *do you know who I am* had more of a flavour to them. That flavour was usually blood, more specifically blood in their mouths, but who was he to judge? Still alive, that was who. The tribune left his crossbow on the ground, leaning into a run even as he unsheathed his knives. Borer was in charge of the shooting, and though the man remained hopelessly worthy of his name bolts began taking lives before the special tribune stepped into the

fray. A streak of lightning from the column hit the ground with a spray of dirt ahead of him, but Robber adjusted his stride to go around without missing a beat. The casting from the mages was sporadic, and wherever it came from was drowned in brightsticks before they could manage a second round. Sliding under a frenzied ox, the yellow-eyed tribune emerged at the back of black-robed Taghreb and punctured her kidney without any warning. She tried to get a last word out, but a knife to the throat took care of that. Blades still dripping, the goblin moved on.

He'd given orders to take a few prisoners, but his merry minions did tend to pull the trigger whenever something got into their crosshairs. He didn't entirely blame them: any Praesi important enough to know something would have a few nasty curses in their arsenal. Smoothly scuttling under a cart, Robber sought his next target. Of the original hundred Praesi, half had died to the initial charges and volley. Another few had been incapacitated by the smoke and maybe twenty had died to the blades of the raiders who'd gone charging in. Borer's boys were putting bolts in any isolated ones, and that left... a nice little cluster of twenty near the middle of the skirmish, shielding a furious-looking Soninke from the violence. Now *that* looked like someone who'd give up useful stuff under the knife. Robber sheathed one of his blades, took a brightstick out of his haversack and shoved it under his armpit as he struck the match. A heartbeat later he popped out from under the cart with a lit cylinder in hand, running at the cluster as fast as he could.

Two robed men turned their eyes to him immediately. Robber grinned nastily and went through the old drill. *One, they cast.* Two pairs of hands rose and two pairs of lips spoke words in the arcane tongue as his feet devoured the distance. *Two, they aim.* They'd been trained for battle-casting, he saw. They only picked their angle once his feet were on the ground, between steps. *Three, be elsewhere.* He rolled to the side, the space he'd occupied a heartbeat earlier filling with flame and sizzling dark energy. Smoothly returning to his feet, he tossed the brightstick right above their heads and closed his eyes. The bright flash and loud bang would make sure they weren't able to cast a second time before he was on them. Pupils contracting even under his eyelids, Robber blessed the Gobbler for having made his people's senses harder to shake than those of humans: he'd been in the brightstick's range too, but he'd get back his eyes and ears before the mages did. Leaning so far forward his chin almost touched the floor, the tribune sliced through the back of one's leg and simultaneously buried his other blade in the other's belly.

The Praesi in charge was still blinded, he saw, and with a grin he leapt onto the man's face. Wrapping his legs around the Soninke's neck as he toppled to the ground, Robber sunk his teeth into the flesh beneath the hair. Much screaming ensued, to his

amusement. *Please, I didn't even touch the skull.* Unlike orcs fangs, goblins ones weren't capable of crunching through bone: his kind were more scavengers than predators.

"I got the big one," he called out. "Wipe out the rest."

"Crossbows, fire at will," Captain Borer calmly ordered.
"Munitions, withhold."

The tribune's second-in-command lacked that touch of in-your-face that was the usual signature of sappers, but something had to be said for keeping your calm when the blades were out. He almost reminded Robber of Hakram, if the orc had traded away his sense of humour and a few feet in height for superior goblin good looks. Poor Hakram, sadly born one of goblinkind's homelier cousins. Thick skin, thick bones, but small eyes like a ferret and too much muscle to ever crawl his way through a tunnel. The Soninke under him was panicking so Robber let go long enough to kick him in the face until he fell unconscious. A handful of crossbow bolts later and no Praesi were left to make trouble, his people swarming the field eagerly. Robber wiped his blades on the unconscious Soninke's face before sheathing them.

"So what have we got, my pretties?" he asked.

"Stone, Special Tribune," word came from further down as canvas was ripped off carts.

"These guys have the *worst* loot," Lieutenant Rattler complained.

"Rattler, stop whining and bind this one," Robber said, pointing a foot at the unconscious Soninke.

"You know I'm right, Chief," she muttered, eyes flicking down and lips demurely covering her teeth in a display acknowledging his authority.

She'd been Loud Eagle tribe before joining the Legions. One of the few surface tribes that still raided regularly – their Matrons and women took more of an interest in matters of violence, as a consequence. War was still spoken of of *male's work* with that understated contempt, but no Matron would let a matter so important to her tribe entirely in the hands of males. There was a reason Robber didn't put anyone fresh from the Eyries in her line: Rattler was opinionated enough that she'd reinforce bad habits from home. A lot of male goblins deferred to women, even those of lower rank, for their first few years in the Legions. Fucked with the chain of command, not that the Special Tribune cared a lot about *that* – but officers afraid of contradicting a female wouldn't speak up themselves, and that he actually gave a shit about. Didn't help that there wasn't a single female goblin in the Fifteenth that wasn't an officer, since they didn't enrol in the ranks: it was the War College for

them or nothing at all. Command was the birthright of their gender, after all.

The Special Tribune spat to the side. There was a reason unruly types like him were dumped into the Legions: back home he'd have started to ask *questions* eventually, and though he'd have gotten a shallow grave for it the Matrons didn't like anyone rocking their boat.

"Well, would you look at *that*," Captain Clipper called out. "Chief, we're rich."

Robber flicked a glance in the direction: Clipper was in the middle cart, sitting on what looked like a pile of solid gold ingots. The Special Tribune whistled.

"There's your prize, Rattler," he said. "Praesi gold. We get any richer than this and it'll start the Eight Rising."

"I nominate myself as Goddess-Queen of all the Tribes," Clipper announced imperiously.

"Will you use your power for good?" one of the sappers asked, grinning.

"No," Clipper decided. "Fear me, expendable minions. You will die in droves for my amusement."

"As rival candidate, I nominate Borer wearing a wig," Robber yelled.

Considering goblins were hairless, the hilarity of an expressionless Borer ruling with luscious blond curls was not to be underestimated. There were murmurs of approval among the horde.

"You can serve as my treacherous consort, Robber," Clipper generously allowed.

The seductive flash of fangs was nothing new – the captain was a notorious flirt – but the way she'd accented his name in Lower Miezan had him frowning. It was almost the same that his name would be pronounced in stonetongue. Well, the last part of it anyway. Though in the bastard tongue of the Empire he was called Robber, a more accurate translation of his name in the Eyries would be *the-glint-in-the-eyes-of-one-about-to-rob-the-unwary*. Doing even that much was walking the line of what got you Preserver attention. Robber was not eager to have the hounds of the Matrons slaughter his entire cohort in their beds for leaking parts of the stonetongue to outsiders. He'd chastise her later in private.

"Float the notion by the Boss, see how that turns out," he suggested.

"Fifty fifty odds, if it results in dead Truebloods," a sapper called out.

There was a hearty round of cackles. His cohort set to torching everything but the gold cart – that was headed back to Marchford with their wounded – as Robber signalled for Borer to join him and they headed together for the still-unconscious Soninke. Rattler had tied him up good and proper, so they wasted no time in slapping the Wastelander awake. Eyes opened blearily and filled with rage before a heartbeat had passed. Gods, they were so predictable sometimes.

"Do you have any idea-"

Robber slapped him.

"Name?" he asked.

"I am Mulade Humin, heir to-"

Robber slapped him again.

"Nice to meet you, Mumu," he said. "I'm Special Tribune Robber, official lesser lesser footrest to the Lady of Marchford."

"What is the meaning of this attack, goblin?" the Soninke spat.

"You mean, like, in a philosophical sense?" Robber mused.

"I mean how *dare* you attack a highborn under the protection of the Lady Diabolist?" the noble sneered. "We will have your hide for this."

Robber slapped him a third time, this once more for his personal satisfaction than anything.

"I'd worry more about surviving this conversation than what's going to happen to me, if I were you," the goblin said. "Borer, show him the knife."

Captain Borer sighed and went fishing in his haversack, producing an oversized dagger with saw teeth and a ruby the size of an egg set into the pommel.

"This is the murder knife, Mumu," Robber said. "Every time you don't tell us what we want to know, we're gonna use it."

"Cheap tactics will not-"

Borer stabbed him in the shoulder without any need for prompting. The Soninke screamed.

"It's like you're not even listening," Robber said, sadly shaking his head. "Now, Mumu, what does dear ol' Akua need all this stone and gold for?"

"I don't know," Mulade said.

"Guess," Robber said before Borer stabbed the man in the other shoulder.

"Sandstone is used in rituals," the noble finally panted after another bout of screaming. "It has the property of clarity and you can't find the right kind in the provinces."

"What's she building?" the Special Tribune asked.

"No one knows," Mulade babbled hastily. "The Empress is trying to find out."

"And if I asked you to guess?" Robber said, brow raising again.

"I'm not a mage," the noble replied mulishly. "And you killed all of mine."

"Fair enough," the goblin shrugged.

He rose to his feet. Borer, without missing a beat, slit the prisoner's throat. The man didn't even have time to panic. Which was good, fear gave human flesh a bad taste and they were low on rations. The Special Tribune took a brightstick out of his haversack and began flipping it absent-mindedly. His cohort had done good work down here, but it was all diminishing returns from now on. Fae moved fast, and there was no telling how far up north they intended on going. Slitting Praesi throats was one thing, but tangling with a Court? Robber's minions didn't have the munitions for that. Nowhere near enough goblinfire in stock. His instincts told him it was time to bail before the hammer fell, but leaving a mystery untouched behind the walls of Liesse didn't sit right with him either.

"Borer," he finally said.

"Special Tribune?" the other goblin replied calmly.

"Take the cohort back to Marchford with the gold," he ordered. "I'm taking a tenth south to have a closer look."

"Is that wise, sir?" his captain asked, large eyes more green than yellow blinking.

Robber grinned unpleasantly, tossing up the brightstick.

"You know what they say, Captain – only cowards live to fifteen."

He was thirteen, now, going on fourteen. About time he started taking some serious risks.

—

They'd waited for a moonless night. Swimming in the Hengest Lake wasn't exactly his idea of a good time — as a rule goblins made better drowners than swimmers — but whoever ruled Liesse with the Diabolist gone ran a tight crew. Patrols were regular and wary, wards had been put everywhere and no cart passed the gates without a thorough inspection. Couldn't put wards on water, though. It was one of those weird magical rules, like being unable to scry underground. Robber's tenth emerged by the docks in silence, keeping to the shadows until the patrol above them passed. The Hellhound would be pissed, the goblin thought, when she heard that Liesse had tighter defences than Marchford. He'd make sure to send her a written report about it so she couldn't ignore him.

"Rooftops," Robber whispered, and his raiders nodded.

Going up was an old favourite of his people when forced to infiltrate cities. Unlike goblins humans rarely looked up unless given a reason, and Robber's kind had no problem scaling stone walls — anything that couldn't climb and lived in the Grey Eyries wouldn't get to live long. Liesse was good territory for this kind of travelling, even better than Summerholm. The Gate of the East had been built to resist the Legions so its districts were punctured with wide avenues meant to stop exactly what he was doing, while Liesse was just an old maze of narrow streets this far into the city. Keeping out of sight, the dripping goblin waited for the rest of his tenth to join him. Going through the lake sadly meant they'd had to leave their munitions behind: the haversacks had been made with resisting rain in mind, but swimming was a little too much. Lieutenant Rattler was the last to scuttle across the tiles, and all of them knelt quietly as another patrol passed below.

"We're going to trigger a ward sooner or later," Rattler murmured.

"There should only be alarms, this deep," the Special Tribune said. "And those are prone to triggering too easily. As long as we move fast we have a chance."

"The Ducal Palace will be a fortress," a sapper whispered.

"That just means it's where the good stuff is," Robber grinned, baring his fangs. "Quiet as the grave, my lovelies, or we'll end up in one."

They moved out. Parts of the city weren't as he remembered, the goblin saw. Entire areas had been torn down and rebuilt in stone.

And there's guards on all of those. Whatever the Diabolist was up to, it was big. The Special Tribune made a point out of memorizing the layout as they travelled: the warlock's get might be able to make something out of the pattern. Getting a closer look at whatever was inside those new buildings might have been even more useful, but it would also mean giving up the game early. Wastelanders always put the important stuff in the palaces, it wasn't worth scrapping their chances to have a look there just for some minor hints in the inner city. The raiders only slowed when they reached the furthest edge of the roofs, the open expanse in front of them allowing no discrete path into the headquarters of the Praesi in Liesse.

Even at this hour of the night, the Ducal Palace was an orgy of torches. Most of those were fancy blue ever-burning flames that weren't actually ever-burning – they needed regular juice from mages to keep going. Sadly, they did cast better light than regular torches. There was a full company of guards around the main entrance and from their perch they could see that behind the wall surrounding the palace there were more soldiers patrolling. Like they'd thought, the place was a fucking fortress. And if it didn't have more wards than the average mage's tower, Robber would eat his own toes. They waited for an hour in silence, trying to find a pattern in the patrols before admitting it would take too long to figure one out. Likely the Praesi had borrowed Legion doctrine anyway, which meant varied intervals.

"Side, has to be," Lieutenant Rattler finally said.

"We won't have long before a patrol passes," Robber said. "I want us up that balcony with the closed doors within sixty heartbeats."

Tricky, even for his folk. Goblins were usually faster on their feet than humans and he'd taken no deadweight with him south, but that was a very narrow window of action even for them.

"We could send a bleeder," a sapper whispered.

Robber shook his head. It was an old raiding tactic to send a few young boys to bait the enemy while the real raiders struck another flank, but it wouldn't work here.

"The moment they see one of us this entire place goes on lockdown," he replied. "They'll activate all the wards until sunup just in case, and that's the end of it for us."

Triggered wards, they could deal with. You just had to be lucky and quick enough not to get the nastiness going, or not be there when it did. But Praesi with enough magic to burn would just fill an entire area with flame so no one could pass through, and he wasn't going to bet that the Diabolist didn't have the juice.

Heroes might have the constitution to walk through blockades like that, but Robber's tenth was a great deal squishier.

"On my mark," the Special Tribune said.

They waited for most of an hour before making for the outer wall. Robber took the lead, and was exceedingly careful about looking for runes when scaling the stone – he didn't see any until he reached the top, and leapt down instead of risking putting his feet too close. His tenth followed him like shadows as the padded across the promenade and reached the side of the palace. Above them, two stories up, the balcony that would be their way in towered. There was a mark against the wall where what he guessed had been a trellis once stood, but the Diabolist's people had removed it. Bare hands would have to do. The old stone didn't give them much purchase, since it had been recently polished, but the mortar lines were enough for a goblin. Robber was the first over the balustrade, and there he froze. Two things gave him pause: first the doors to the inside were cracked open just large enough for someone to get through. Second, he'd just set foot on a rune trigger array.

"Chief?" the sapper behind him asked.

"I am so invincible," Robber decided, "that even magic refuses to get into a fight with me."

Someone climbing up cursed and he moved to make room for the others. Kneeling over the runes carved onto the floor, he ran a finger down the grooves.

"Huh," Rattler said, once again last to arrive. "How are we not dead?"

"Someone was here ahead of us," the yellow-eyed tribune murmured. "Someone who can make wards dormant."

"You think the Boss went through?" a sapper asked.

"If she had, there'd be a hole in the ground and half the city would be on fire," Robber noted. "Boss isn't great at quiet."

"But Named work, you think," Rattler guessed.

"Could be the Eyes," he frowned. "But whoever did this, they're inside now."

He rose back to his feet.

"Too late to turn back," he said. "We go forward."

They didn't wander around blindly. Robber had been in the loop before the Battle of Liesse, when the Hellhound had ordered Pickler to draw up plans to breach the palace if the rebels holed

up inside. He'd been more interested in the choke points he'd need to blow to separate the defenders, but he'd gotten a notion of how the Ducal Palace was laid out as a result. The rooms the Dukes and later the Imperial Governors had claimed for their own were in the back, with a view of the lake, but there was no point in heading there. The Diabolist wouldn't be keeping anything interesting upside where anyone could find it. No, it would all be below. Thrice the goblins found other dormant wards on their way to the cellars, at least one of which they would have triggered before noticing it. Merciless Gods, whatever was down there the Diabolist *really* didn't want anyone to find. The room that barred the access to the cellars, they found, had a closed door. Robber pressed his ear to the wood and heard nothing. Empty or warded to be soundproof? Whichever it was, the risk had to be taken.

"Blades out," he ordered.

He pushed the door open, knife in hand, and found a room full of guards. All of which were on the ground and unmoving.

"Fucking Hells," Lieutenant Rattler breathed. "The Assassin?"

Well, it certainly wasn't the work of the Eyes. They were good, but not *that* good. The Special Tribune ushered everyone in and closed the door behind him, only then taking a closer look at the guards.

"No, not the Assassin," he replied, seeing one breathe. "They're still alive."

"*Shit*," a sapper hissed. "That reeks of hero, Chief."

The situation did have the right combination of overwhelming skill and rank stupidity to be heroic work, he had to admit.

"Draper, slit their throats then catch up," he ordered. "The rest of you with me."

The stairs down beckoned him, the way wide open. The goblin froze for the second time that night when he felt the touch of steel on the side of his neck.

"Draper," a voice spoke quietly. "Don't slit those throats. I don't like leaving corpses behind. Good thieves don't need to."

Robber knew for a fact that a heartbeat ago there had been absolutely nothing to his side. And yet, right now, a woman stood there. Callowan, by the skin tone, with short dark hair and wearing comfortable leathers. Sharp blue eyes were studying him amusedly. They had met before, once.

"Evening, Thief," Robber said. "Taking a stroll?"

"What can I say," the heroine smiled. "I'm the curious type and there's just so much here to be curious about."

"Was thinking the same thing," the goblin grinned. "Mind you, would you sheathe that knife?"

The woman raised an eyebrow.

"And why would I do that?"

"'cause I'll sheathe mine," Robber said, lightly tapping the blade he had pointed at her kidney.

"I could kill you before your wrist moved," the heroine said.

"Probably," Robber shrugged. "It'll get messy afterwards, though. And hey, if I'm croaking, you can be sure I'm not gonna do it quietly."

"You'd be sacrificing your own soldiers," Thief said, narrowing her eyes.

"Lady, we're sappers," Lieutenant Rattler chuckled. "The only way we die is *loud*."

The Callowan thinned her lips.

"No throat-slitting?" she asked.

"Goblin word of honour," Robber grinned.

"What's that actually worth?" the heroine asked with morbid curiosity.

"Gold, as long as you're winning," the goblin chuckled.

The Thief rolled her eyes, but the blade returned to its sheath.

"Well, this was delightful but we can go on our merry ways now," Robber suggested. "We just want a peek downstairs."

"You can't," the heroine replied. "It took me an aspect to get through those wards, and when you trigger them you'll empty half a Hell."

The Special Tribune hummed.

"We trade gossip, then," he said. "What's in the basement?"

"A millennium of paranoia carved into the walls," the Thief said. "And over a dozen Deorai the strapped on stone beds."

Robber chewed over that for a moment.

"Are they Watch?"

"No idea," Thief shrugged.

"Doesn't sound good even if they aren't," the goblin admitted.

"There's a reason we're even having this conversation, goblin," the heroine replied frankly.

Robber decided to let that one go. Heroes in general did not have a great many quandaries on the subject of stabbing goblins.

"So, word is you robbed the treasury in Laure," he said.

"I like shiny things," the dark-haired woman smiled.

"Boss might take offence to that, when she's back," he said.

"Everybody knows Foundling's in Arcadia," the heroine snorted. "She's not getting out for a few years, if ever."

"I've known Squire for two years now," Robber said. "And I've never known anyone to make a profit by betting against her."

The Thief rolled her eyes.

"It's one thing to kill a hero, another to fuck with the Winter Court," she said. "And if she's got issue with what I've been doing? She can take it up with me. I'll be in Laure, *wearing her jewels.*"

Robber would have replied, but before he could he was once more looking into thin air.

"Chief?" Rattler prompted. "What do we do now?"

The goblin sighed.

"We run, my lovelies, all the way back to Marchford," he said.

He paused.

"We can steal the silverware on the way out, at least," he decided. "Wouldn't feel right not to."

Deadhand

"I do not fear wicked men, who know only cruelty and pain. The fear they inflict leashes them as well. But a decent man? Oh, there is no limit to the devilry a decent man will fall to, if he believes it necessary."

– King Edward III of Callow

Catherine, after some gentle prodding, had finally gone to bed. She still had quarters that were nominally hers in the royal

palace, and not even the rebels had been arrogant enough to lay a hand on those. The dark-haired woman he called both friend and leader was too tired to even notice the Gallowborne discreetly following her at a distance, three of them ordered to guard her door through the rest of the night. Hakram did not believe that there were many entities within the bounds of Callow that could kill Squire in combat, but daggers in the nights were a different matter. They still got the occasional assassin paid for by Wasteland gold, though considering the amount they'd killed over the last year Praes had to be running out – there were only so many times Adjutant could have the heads of those enterprising fellows put on pikes before the pool of volunteers got truly shallow. Tribune Farrier lingered close, wiping blood off his sword hand with a cloth as Catherine's retinue herded the prisoners away none too gently. The Praesi household troops were still too shocked to protest the treatment.

"Lord Adjutant," the pale-skinned man finally saluted, thumping his fist against his breastplate.

The tall orc replied with the same gesture. He rather liked John Farrier, and believed the feeling was nearly mutual. The man was less than fond of greenskins in general – his grandfather had gotten his head caved in by an orc during the Conquest, and Callowans kept grudges – but their shared loyalties had done much to bring them closer. Another few months to work on him, Hakram thought, and they might even get to a place where they shared drinks. Adjutant would keep at it. The two of them were arguably the members of the Fifteenth who saw the most of Catherine, it was worth putting in an effort for them to get along. Hakram's purpose had been to keep everything running smoothly long before it became his Role.

"You look like you want to say something, Tribune," Hakram gravelled.

That or he was in pain. Humans had such delicate faces, it made their expressions harder to read: neither orcs nor goblins were so... complicated. That the wheat-eaters rarely meant to use their teeth to convey what they were actually conveying only made it more confusing.

"She pulled ahead of the cohort twice, tonight," the dark-haired human said, "And refused to take an escort when she went deeper into the palace."

Worry. This he could deal with.

"That was no slight to your abilities, Tribune," he said. "She's... impatient with this entire situation. And when she was headed for her meeting, guards would have been of no help. If anything she might have needed to protect them."

The pale man's eyes narrowed.

"The Thief," he guessed.

"You haven't had to clean up a corpse," Hakram said, "which means she will be cooperating with us."

"She ain't the nice heroine type," Farrier said. "She won't be above sliding a knife in the Countess' back down the line."

The orc rumbled his approval. Awareness of threats was a good trait for the head of a personal guard to have. Catherine has chosen well in catapulting Farrier up the ranks instead of drawing someone from the officer pool. But then she'd always had a way for gathering talent to her banner, hadn't she?

"It will be seen to," Adjutant said.

The Callowan nodded sharply.

"The Countess didn't give me any orders for the prisoners," he added after a moment.

A concession, this. Tribune Farrier only answered to the Squire, theoretically speaking. That he was requesting instructions, even in such a sideways manner, was an offered hand. Though not an unexpected one: as far as the Empire was concerned, whenever Adjutant spoke it was Catherine Foundling's voice articulating the words. Even nobles courted his attention, nowadays, and wasn't that just the most hilarious thing he'd heard all year? Some brute like him from the Northern Steppes, wielding enough influence to give pause to highborn. Most days Hakram would have preferred to wash his hands of that entirely, but having that kind of clout made it easier to fulfil his duties.

"Staff Tribune Bishara lent us one of her men," he said. "He'll be going through the prisoners to see which can be ransomed back to the Wasteland. The rest we'll be handing to the Governess-General for judgement."

The Tribune's eyes widened.

"It's true, then?" he said. "Baroness Kendall is still alive?"

"We've had word of it," Adjutant grunted. "We still need to confirm, but it seems likely."

"Thank the Gods," Farrier said. "If anyone can put some order in Laure, it's her."

He bit his lip the moment the words left his mouth.

"Not that I mean to impugn the Countess' abilities," he hurriedly added.

"She doesn't enjoy being behind a desk," Hakram said. "It's not a crime to notice it."

It would have been hard for the both of them not to, given how often she used personally drilling the Gallowborne as an excuse to foist off paperwork on him. It wasn't that she was incapable of ruling, Adjutant knew. She had, after all, managed to set Callow on the path to recovery after less than a year in charge even with the Ruling Council slowing the process. In large part that had been through allowing her newly-appointed Callowan governors the leeway to do as the saw fit, but knowing when to give over power was also part of ruling. But she hadn't taken to it the way she had to battlefield command, that much was glaringly obvious. The Squire shone brightest with a sword in hand, like the Warlords of old. There was a reason orcs called her that, and it wasn't just respect. A damned shame it was not possible for her to transition into that Name: it would suit her better than that of Black Knight in many ways. But even after centuries to be the Warlord was, deep down, to be an orc. *The* orc. There was no changing that bedrock foundation.

"We'll keep them in the city gaols, then," Farrier said. "It would save the Baroness some trouble to execute them now, but I suppose a public trial will help strengthen her grip on the city."

Hakram nodded and allowed the man to leave, trading salutes. He waited until the Tribune had left before clearing his throat.

"Tordis," he said.

The orc lieutenant emerged from the shadows where'd she been leaning against the wall, hand resting idly on the pommel of her sword.

"Deadhand," she replied, inclining her head.

Catherine had granted him a tenth under Tordis as his personal command during the Liesse campaign, and he'd later expanded their numbers to a full line after having Tordis promoted from sergeant to lieutenant. He'd needed the manpower, even if his original task of finding the leaks in the Fifteenth had largely been handed off to Ratface and Aisha since. The lieutenant was an old friend from Rat Company, and one he'd shared a bedroll with in the past. There'd been nothing more to that than flesh and comradeship, and neither of them had been interested in anything more serious – her being under his command had effectively closed off that avenue for good since. Squire had already amusedly called him a harlot for a month last time she'd seen a woman come out of his tent, and if she ever did that around Robber odds were he'd have to deal with a song about it. The goblin had proved he could compose truly filthy rhymes when'd he'd penned that tune about Nauk and the Fifteenth's oxen, so Hakram was eager to avoid

the pitfall if he could. He'd made a point of being even more discreet since becoming the Adjutant.

"Take word to Nauk," he said. "I'll need legionaries tomorrow to serve as public criers. Callowans, if possible. No more than a company."

She nodded.

"And send someone to speak to Farrier," he added after a moment. "We've got two high-profile prisoners, and I want them held separately from both each other and the rest of the soldiers."

There might be mages among them, and there were discreet ways to scry. Better to keep the High Lords in the dark about what was happening in Laure as long as possible, or they'd start to wonder how the Fifteenth had made it so quickly to the old capital. It was only a short set of conclusions from there to figuring out they'd used Arcadia, and that trump card was best kept under wraps while they still could. The moment they realized that the Fifteenth could march straight into the Wasteland without ever needing to cross at the Blessed Isles, they'd start taking desperate measures. Too many of them had openly aligned with the Diabolist for them not to fear brutal retribution now. Catherine had something of a reputation in that regard.

"Should I have a study prepared for you?" Tordis asked.

Hakram shook his head. His bare bone fingers tightened.

"I still need to have one last conversation tonight," he said.

—

Hakram had visited Laure more than he'd ever thought he would, since the Liesse Rebellion, but the former capital of Callow was still foreign city to him. Unlike Robber, who would start feeling at home the moment he'd stabbed someone in an alley anywhere in Calernia, he'd never become comfortable here. Marchford was starting to feel like home, though not as much as the Fifteenth, but the history here would never allow the orc to feel as anything but a stranger. How many hundreds of thousands of his kind had died, trying to take these streets for the Tower? Laure had been the beating heart of the Praesi occupation since the Conquest, but for all that it still felt Callowan to the core in a way few other cities he'd visited did. It was unlike Summerholm, where Callowans strode through the streets eating Soninke grilled meats and Praesi bartered in the markets with pale-skinned merchants, or even Marchford where young widows now traded heated glances with good-looking legionaries while goblins cheated at dice games with old men in older taverns.

Even Liesse, in the depths of the south, had felt... different. There was a difference there the way there was a difference between Taghreb and Soninke: cousins, but not ones who always got along well. Hakram had come to learn that Callow was no more a monolith than Callowans often assumed Praes was. The northern baronies to the east of Daoine were little involved with the rest of the realm, busy with their cattle-herding and weaving, and the wide central plains surrounding Vale saw themselves as a breed apart from both the Liessen to the south and the larger cities bordering the Silver Lake. There were divisions, but shallower ones than in the Wasteland. They were more like the Clans, only willing to squabble amongst themselves so long as there was no other enemy to fight. The Legions of Terror had forged unity between these old tribes one failed invasion at a time, he thought. Breathing the foul city air, Hakram dismissed the thoughts and slowed his steps until he stood in the centre of an intersection.

He reached for his Name, the feeling like putting on his armour and letting the weight of it settle on his shoulders. **Find**, he whispered inside his mind, and the wheel spun.

He picked the avenue his Name nudged him towards and trod down until the next intersection, where he invoked his aspect again. It was slow going, and twice he had to readjust the course. His target was moving, and had noticed it was being pursued: his ears caught the sound of footsteps on rooftops, too large to be those of goblins. It took half a bell for him to end up in the part of the city Catherine called "Dockside", though no sign marked it as such. The orc was panting lightly when he found the alehouse he suspected was the hiding hole, cold sweat going down his back. The more he called on the aspect the more tiring using it became. But he was well-rested, and barely needed to sleep these days. He could take it. The establishment was shuttered, but there were lights peeking through. The footsteps quickened behind him, and Adjutant turned to meet his greeters.

Two men, Callowans. The older one took out a knife, a slender little thing that almost made him want to laugh.

"Alehouse's closed," the younger one said.

"Not to me," Hakram gravelled.

"Shouldn't have come alone," the older one said, "if you were going to mouth off."

He moved. Adjutant did not bother to take his axe in hand. He waited, then caught the wrist holding the knife and bent his legs: his muscles shifted as he swung the man around, using him to clobber the other Callowan. The two of them landed in a pile of limbs and curses.

"I'd be within my rights to kill them," Hakram called out to the night.

"Squire agreed to a truce," Thief replied, strolling out of the alley.

"Then discipline your people," Adjutant grunted. "If they'd killed a legionary, a great deal of blood would have followed."

"I refrained from drowning your goblins in the Lake when they poked around," the short-haired heroine said. "That's already showing a great deal of restraint."

The orc glanced contemptuously at the two thieves, who were hastily rising to their feet.

"Don't try to rob Legion personnel again," he told them. "You'll live longer."

The Thief glanced at her men.

"Scuttle off, boys," she ordered. "And remember not all orcs are this calm after steel comes out."

Hakram did not bother to watch them flee into the night, his attention all on the Thief.

"Let's talk," he said, and it wasn't a suggestion.

"For a bunch of villains, the lot of you sure do *chatter* a lot," the woman sighed.

She signalled from him to follow her anyway, her knuckles against the door resounding in a pattern so swift he almost missed it. The door opened and they were ushered in. The place was a pisshole, as the exterior had indicated. After his years at the War College Hakram was no stranger to those, though, and at least out here his nose didn't have to deal with clouds of poppy smoke hanging in the air. The dozen men and women inside, scattered throughout the tables, watched him in silence as he followed Thief to a dimly lit alcove in the corner. She already had a pitcher of ale on the table, and she stole a tankard from another table on the way to the table to fill it. The tall orc sat, the wooden chair creaking under the weight of him, and after taking a sip made an effort not to grimace. The ale might as well have a rat still floating in it. She couldn't possibly be drinking the same stuff, could she?

"Deadhand," Thief enunciated. "Now there's a fancy title. Catchy, too. Praesi do have a way with that."

"You were there when I earned it," Hakram said.

The heroine laughed, pushing back her bangs.

"Is that what this is about?" she asked. "Are you holding a grudge, Adjutant?"

Her grin was almost mocking.

"Can't have that," she said. "We're on the same side now. Gotta get along."

Hakram set aside the tankard patiently.

"Catherine likes to think of the best of people," he said. "That they see reason. That they will hold to their promises."

"Naïve, for a villain," Thief said.

"It has paid off more often than not," Adjutant said. "Put trust in people and they feel the need to live up to it."

"I'm deeply honoured Her Gracious Majesty Foundling has seen fit to make me a minion, of course," Thief smiled. "All hail the queen."

"Of course," Hakram continued calmly, "sometimes people think to take advantage of that. To use their second chance against her."

"It's almost like the fish she's selling smells slightly off," the Thief mocked.

Adjutant's dead hand snaked across the table, lightning-quick, and seized the woman by the throat. He knocked the table away rising, slamming her against the wall hard enough the wood shattered like clay. He heard a chorus of knives being taken out in the room to their side, and slightly raised his voice as he continued choking the heroine.

"A single one of you moves and I'll snap her neck," he mildly informed them.

None of them did.

"When people make that mistake, Thief, and aim a knife at her back – they find me waiting," he continued, still in that mild tone. "Now, what I'm doing tonight will make you hate me. That's fine. As long as you also remember the fear in your guts right now. Listen to that fear, when you start thinking about turning on her. Because I'll be watching, and unlike Catherine I don't believe in second chances. *Much less third ones.*"

He released Thief, letting her drop to the floor and gasp for breath.

"Enjoy your evening," he said politely. "I look forward to working with you."

He walked away, and not a soul dared stop him.

Closure

"The most important part of any summary execution is to remember to have fun and be yourself."

– Dread Empress Malevolent II

The last time Alaya had come to Wolof was decades ago, when the ashes of the civil war were still warm. She'd gone to humble a rival and assert control on a stage all the High Lords would be avidly watching, and found victory. She'd not returned until now. The more years passed, the more desperate High Lady Tasia had become. Even when she'd thought she was winning, she had felt the noose beginning to tighten. Now the Dread Empress of Praes had returned to the oldest city in the Empire, one that boasted it alone had suffered no foreign occupation since the Miezans. Even the crusaders under Eleanor Fairfax had shied from those high walls and the horrors kept leashed behind them. A statement that had resounded lightly, coming from a host that had pulled down the Tower itself on the head of the most powerful madwoman to ever rule Praes. Alaya did not share Amadeus' contempt for Dread Empress Triumphant, as it happened. Oh, she did not deny his reasons.

Triumphant had spent a generation of the Wasteland's youth on foreign fields, forged the Principate through her massacres and managed to drive to war two empires separated from the Empire by an entire sea. It could not be denied that she had broken Praes so thoroughly that four decades had passed before war could be taken to the crusader kings that had carved realms out of the Wasteland's meat. For all that, Triumphant had understood the nature of the Empire better than any Tyrant before or since. Under her rule there had been no betrayals, no scheming Chancellor or rebellious High Lords. All had been united in terror of the monster of monsters. It was not a sustainable method of rule, of course, as the swift collapse of Triumphant's conquests has proved. Yet there were lessons to be learned from her successes, not to be dismissed for her penultimate failure.

For the Empire to function as a single, smoothly running entity, there could be no snake held close. Triumphant had achieved this through overwhelming might, Alaya had by censoring the Name out of existence. There could be no High Lords in a position to pose a threat, either. Instead of crucifying half of them and binding devils to the rest, she had achieved this by slowly and carefully destroying the influence of the Court in the ruling structure of the Empire. The only conflict among the highborn now was between the Moderates and her own followers, warring for her favour and backing. Having achieved both these conditions, what Dread Empress Malicia needed was *terror*. The ability to inflict large-

scale destruction at will, to give pause to anyone who would threaten her position. A deterrent beyond argument. She'd once thought Amadeus could be this, but her dear friend was a scalpel and what she needed was an earthquake. Catherine might become this, given her affinity for destruction, but she was difficult to control and would need years to grow.

Alaya had sought alternatives and found one that suited, a keystone for the monument she had spent her entire life crafting. It would require sacrifice to be birthed, but if Malicia had to bleed it would be by her own design and no one else's. Quietly amused at the thought, the Empress watched the legionaries pour through the gates of Wolof.

Taking the city by force, even with the three legions assembled here under Marshal Nim, would have been horrifically difficult. Wolof was the heart of sorcery in Praes, its ritual sites millennia old and its vaults of monsters deep and terrible. But the city had not stood united behind High Lady Tasia. It had been eating itself alive as Tasia's nephew attempted to usurp her seat, all those powerful mages and hardened soldiers slaughtering each other in the streets. Sargon Sahelian had unleashed all the devils held by ancient pacts only to corner dearest Tasia into calling on a demon of Madness. Half the city had violently butchered itself merely from suffering its presence, until desperate rituals managed to banish it. And then Marshal Nim's legions had calmly marched through the gate, wading through the sea of corpses. Fifty thousand dead, by the most conservative estimates. The contracts of at least a hundred devils had been twisted beyond control by the demon and the creatures were still loose in Wolof, Legion mages sweeping through to bind and banish them wherever they could be found.

Many would escape into the Wasteland, roaming for years before they were finally caught. No matter. It would occupy the days of new High Lord of Wolof long enough he would not realize his power was being curtailed until it was too late for Wolof's influence to recover in this lifetime. Sargon was still among the living; this much had been confirmed. He was under Legion protection and would remain there until he swore allegiance to Alaya. The Dread Empress set her mount to a trot, the silent Sentinels surrounding her scaring even legionaries enough that they gave the procession a wide berth. The ancient fortress at the heart of the city had been breached this morning, its wards shattered and the few remaining loyal household troops put to the sword by the newly-raised Fourteenth Legion. They'd been in need of tempering, Marshal Nim had told her over a cup of wine. Forcing a dug-in position with heavy mage presence would bloody them enough they would be ready for the inevitable war with Procer. It was not as inevitable as the ogre thought, but that was a hand best kept in the dark until the very last moment.

High Lady Tasia had been captured by noon, after much struggle. Two full cohorts had died in the struggle before mages managed to break her power. She'd drained the life of hundreds to replenish her vitality when wounded and almost managed to collapse the fortress on the soldiers of the Fourteenth with some sort of ancient artefact. It was an undeniable confirmation that Alaya had been correct to accept her surrender decades ago, no matter how Amadeus had chafed. If she could do this much when spent, how much blood would it have taken to break her in the fullness of her power? Now the proud aristocrat that schemed to destroy Alaya for so many years was bound and shackled, unable to call on even a speck of sorcery. The Empress could have ordered her executed, and would, but a conversation was owed before. An old enemy was dear as an old friend, in some ways, and some courtesies were due. Tasia had almost as much of a hand in what the Wasteland had been shaped to become as Alaya herself, after all.

No unnecessary risks were taken. Additional runic shackles of different patterns were added to ensure Tasia would not be able to use a last moment surprise, every inch of her body inspected for weapons and artefacts. The room where they would speak would be in the city, not her fortress, and heavily warded against dimensional interference. No hidden space would be emptied to destroy them both. The Sentinels spread out around the beautiful stone manse the Empress had chosen for this matter, some following her inside but remaining at the door of the salon she entered. Tea had already been served when Alaya entered – her own brew, a precautions perhaps unnecessary but taken regardless – though the fragrantly steaming porcelain pot remained full. With her hands bound, Tasia had been unable to pour herself a cup. The High Lady of Wolof was bruised and not even her poise could hide her exhaustion, but she had not been touched since her capture. Torture of an old enemy was very much gauche, after all, beneath women such as them. Even in this state, Tasia was beautiful. She did not seem a day older than thirty, her smooth dark skin and golden eyes something even a young girl would envy.

"Your Dread Majesty," the High Lady of Wolof greeted her.

"Dearest Tasia," Malicia smiled, taking the teapot in hand and pouring two cups deftly.

She waited for an invitation before seating herself across the elegant table for two. Hands still shackled, the other Soninke sipped at her cup before chuckling languidly

"My favourite," she complimented. "You always did play the Game beautifully."

"Iron sharpens iron," Malicia replied in a backhanded compliment.

Tasia leaned back against the cushioned back of her seat, a minor breach of decorum her old enemy would never have allowed herself if she'd thought she would survive the day.

"It was the irony of it I could not resist," Tasia said. "All that gold you poured into Procer, turned to silver and sent to my coffers. You might as well have been funding me yourself."

"It was a long game," Malicia said. "And an expensive one. Truly, ruining you cost more than the Conquest itself."

"You knew since the beginning, then," the High Lady sighed, almost admiring. "Nigh forty years of preparation for a single blow. I am in awe, Malicia. We've not seen the likes of you in centuries."

You have never seen the likes of me, Alaya thought. And never will. That was your mistake from the beginning, measuring me through names long dead. It would have been tawdry to gloat, and so the thought remained unspoken.

"I truly do regret that you will not see the coming years," the Empress said, genuinely saddened. "That you must leave us at all. A mind like yours, Tasia, the wonders I could have crafted with it."

"It was always going to be this way," Tasia said gently. "You are smothering the soul of Praes one exquisite scheme at a time. I honour the method, but despise the intent."

Alaya conceded the point silently. A waste, but perhaps an inevitable one. Tasia had been one of the few highborn in the Wasteland to grasp her intent. It was her tragedy that she'd lacked the ability to do anything about it.

"Would you like to tell me your plan?" Malicia offered.

The High Lady sipped her tea, considering the matter.

"Yes," she decided. "You must have grasped the shape of it, by now."

"Your daughter to replace me," the Empress said. "Yourself holding the strings."

"She chafed at the notion," Tasia confessed. "But as long as I held her father, she would have submitted."

"He fled the city not long before she betrayed you, I believe," Malicia said.

"He must have been in contact with her for years under my nose," she sighed. "Such a talented man. He would have made a fitting consort, had he any ambition at all."

"Callow?" Malicia asked.

"Cowed through diabolism," Tasia smiled. "I'd gathered a great many contracts, before my nephew usurped them. As for your Duni hound, he could be leashed through his attachment to that Callowan girl. With him under our thumb the rest of the Calamities would have fallen in line."

It never ceased to amaze Alaya how, even after decades of Amadeus crushing them in every conflict, the High Lords never quite managed to understand exactly what they were dealing with. They would all have been dead within the year, even if their fall broke Praes for generations.

"You believed your agents in the Legion would bring enough to your side, then," Malicia said.

"Ah," Tasia breathed. "You found them?"

"I have hooks in the minds of every officer of legate or above in the Wasteland," the Empress said. "Your attempts to turn them were doomed from inception."

The other woman smiled.

"A precaution to check me or the Carrion Lord, I wonder?" she said.

Amadeus was not aware that she'd surpassed the limitations of Speaking, that much was true. By feeding her aspect of **Rule** into the act she could plant commands without ever saying them out loud, something not even Wekesa could reproduce. Maddie would be furious if he knew, but there were risks Alaya was not willing to take and twelve thousand men in Praes she did not control directly was one of them. As for Tasia's insinuation, it was only that. Amadeus would never turn on her, not even if it killed him. If there was one person she could trust in Creation it was him, even if in the dark of night the fear came to her. Alaya would not be ruled by old wounds, and chose to match faith for faith.

"I take it you have no true notion of what Akua is doing in Liesse?" Malicia said.

"I'd believed it to be wards, to keep the Squire at bay," Tasia said. "Evidently I was wrong. She must have infiltrated my spies."

"Mine as well," Malicia laughed. "Though not as well as she thinks."

"You've been watching her since the beginning, then?" the High Lady asked.

"Oh yes," the Empress murmured. "I went to a great deal of trouble to get her the materials she needed without her catching on."

The golden-eyed woman hid her surprise, but not quite well enough. Alaya pretended not to notice – Tasia was quite weary, some allowances must be made.

"You don't intend to destroy her work," she said.

"No," Malicia said, savouring the fragrant tea. "She's truly brilliant, your daughter. She would be a match for Warlock, were he thirty years younger. I must compliment you on the education you afforded her."

"Talent must be fostered," Tasia waved away, managing to inject grace to the gesture even shackled. "A weapon, is it?"

"The likes of which have not been seen since the birth of the Kingdom of the Dead," Malicia said.

"Yet you do not intend to make use it, after taking it from her," the High Lady of Wolof said.

"I imagine she will unleash it at least once, when dear Catherine comes for her," the Empress replied. "It will be demonstration enough. A deterrent, Tasia. It will be the deterrent we have always needed. A weapon even Cordelia Hasenbach fears."

"A lesser ambition, this," the other woman chided.

"I would rather rule the Empire forever than the continent for a year, darling," Malicia replied. "A mere difference in intent."

They remained silent for a moment after that, the comfortable quiet between two women who had for so long tried to ruin the other.

"She may yet triumph," Tasia finally said. "She has the best of me and of her father as well. If what we are could ever beat you, it will be through her."

"She will try," Malicia said sadly. "They always do."

Finishing her tea, the High Lady of Wolof met her enemy's eyes.

"The cup," she said. "Coated with poison before I was taken here?"

"Sweetsleep," the Empress agreed.

"What a soft touch you are," Tasia teased. "It could have gone either way, couldn't it?"

"Yes," the Dread Empress of Praes lied.

"Liar," the High Lady of Wolof smiled fondly, and her eyes closed.

She took no breath after that.

"Goodbye, Tasia," Alaya murmured. "I think I will miss you, if only a little."

Dues

"Even the kindest hero stands over a spreading graveyard."

– Theodore Langman, Wizard of the West

Vivienne Dartwick had wondered, about what made her different from all the other pickpockets and thieves that haunted the nights of Southpool. As far as she could tell it was that she didn't *need* to steal. Her father had been a baron under the Count of Southpool, but never a martial man and so though he had sent troops to join the armies failing to turn back the Conquest he'd never fought in a battle himself. He was a baron no longer, since all noble titles in the county had been abolished after the first Imperial Governor was appointed, but even after the Praesi took their cut Vivienne's family remained wealthier than a talented merchant could hope to become with a lifetime of work. Her mother had passed in a hunting accident when she'd been young, and the strangeness of that had been what set her on her path. Mother had been a devil with a bow and a better rider, so her mount getting scared by a wolf and and breaking her ribs in panic stretched credulity, somewhat. She'd only been seven, back then, and Father had made sure to keep her in the dark. It had worked for a few years, but not forever.

He'd gotten forgetful in his old age, and the bar on his study's door could be forced up if the lock wasn't properly turned. Vivienne had only gone in to smoke his pipe since he never let her try it, but when rustling through the drawers to find it she'd seen her mother's name on parchment. Her father had petitioned Governess Ife, successor to the original governor, to investigate the circumstances of her mother's death. He'd called them highly suspicious. The letter the Governess sent back was dripping with implied threats and made a point of mentioning rebel elements. Treason didn't fetch the same punishment everywhere, in Callow, since the governors were given free rein to run their territory as they wished. She'd heard that in the south if someone got caught the entire family was executed. In Southpool, though, it was only the directly implicated that got the noose. The families got away with a harsh fine. She'd remembered, then, that around the time of her mother's death Father had become very frugal for a few months.

That painted a picture she did not like.

It wasn't that her family was in trouble, not anymore. Her father had sold a smithy they'd once owned, which he said wasn't turning up much a profit under the Tower's weapons prohibitions anyway. But when she next had her lessons with her tutor, Vivienne made sure to ask the man about laws. About how much the fine for being associated with treasonous elements was. It... wasn't a small sum. She could understand why Father had cut corners until he could find a buyer for the smith. But it was a very cheap price, for her mother's life. There was something *wrong* about the Praesi killing her mother and making her family pay for it. It was like an itch in the back of her mind she couldn't scratch. It should have been them it cost, not her father. And that was when it began, when she decided to make right. Gold couldn't ever make up for her mother, but she could make them feel it. The number she came up with was a whim. Ten times what they'd fined, and once more to make up for the fine itself. It was enough to build three manors in the country, she knew, but anything less would have an insult.

Vivienne knew she wasn't as pretty as some of the other noble girls, not matter how nice her dresses and how many ribbons the maids put in her hair, but she wasn't ugly and boys got dumb when you smiled at them and pretended they were interesting. It wasn't hard to find one of the Imperial orphanage boys near Kingspot Alley that ditched their lessons to mess around in the streets and knew how to pick a pocket. Talking the boy into teaching her was a lot harder, and she had to go through the kitchen for honeybread when the cooks were asleep before he agreed. Vivienne found she had a knack for it. She'd always been good with her hands, even if her handwriting was wobbly, and if she apologized when running into people all they saw was a little girl who felt real sorry, yessir. Getting her tutor to pretend she was still at her lessons was harder, but he'd been sleeping with one of the maids and Father would have thrown him out if he knew. As long as she kept pace with her learning, the man would keep his mouth shut. He'd have a hard time being hired by other nobles if he had a bad reputation.

Within two months she was better than the orphan who'd taught her, and after stealing a sharp little kitchen knife she began trying her hand at cutting purses. She'd need help, though, if she was to steal bigger things than a drunk trader's ale money. People to find targets for her. The eldersmen were useless. People said they'd had a hand in the old riots that made the Governess back down, but ever since they'd been terrified of her. The Guilds were weak and poor and they answered to people in Laure, and everyone knew those were Praesi lapdogs. The guilds that were out in the open, anyway. The Guild of Assassins had people in Southpool, and they took contracts if you put the word in the right place, but Vivienne wasn't out to kill anyone. What would

be the point? Governess Ife would just be replaced by some other Wastelander, and they might be worse. Coin, though, coin would hurt her. So Vivienne hung out in one of those seedy taverns where there were rumours the people of the Guild of Thieves came to drink. No one said anything to her, even when she cut purses, and she was about to go spare when a grinning old man from the north told her to sit down at his table.

"Ain't no one that's going to apprentice you, girl," he said. "No matter how much stolen copper you flash."

"I'm good," Vivienne complained.

"Passable," he said, the Harrow accent thick. "But you look like a little noble, and no one wants that kind of attention."

That night, sneaking back in her room, Vivienne stood in front of her mirror with the kitchen knife and hacked through her hair. It stung and tore, but she went through with it to the end. She went back to the Kingspot orphans and found the idiot boy flirting with some tanner's daughter. He looked nervous when she walked up to them, but she ignored him. She traded one of her cheaper dresses for the girl's spare clothes, and returned to the tavern.

"Took a knife to it, did you?" the grinning old man asked.

"I'll take a knife to you too, if you don't help me," she threatened.

That was how she apprenticed to Sidehands, which he insisted he was his name. He was an old crook and he'd claim nine tenths of whatever she stole as long as he taught her, but he let her buy tools and taught her how to use them. More importantly, he introduced her to the wrong sort of people. Fences, handlers who had servants from important places on the take and a few roughs who'd make a ruckus if you needed someone distracted.

"Ain't a lot of rules in the Guild," Sidehands said. "We're not a rule-abiding kind, and even the King's only the King as long as he keeps his crown out of other people's hands."

"But there are," Vivienne said. "Rules."

"We don't kill," the old man said. "That's the one that matters. And we steal from the right people."

"'cause we're thieves, not murderers," she said, duly impressed.

"'cause if we start putting knives in people the Guild of Assassins is going to start floating us by the docks one by one," Sidehands replied, amused. "We take from merchants, we take from traders, we can take from ye old nobles. But we don't fuck with

the Praesi. Otherwise they send for the mages, and there ain't no cover of night that'll get rid of a scrying spell."

"The Hedge Guild has mages that could do that," Vivienne said.

"Now there's a bunch of real thieves," Sidehands chuckled. "You should see their rates. Don't think about it, girl. All the mages with real talent were pressed into the Legions and what's left is crawling with Eyes of the Empire. You ask them to block a scrying spell and the city guard will knock at your door before the hour's done."

He grimaced, then patted her shoulder.

"Besides, there's worse out there," he said. "The Guild took a deal, when the Carrion Lord came riding in. He ain't the kind of man you want to cross."

Vivienne smiled and agreed and because everyone trusted a smiling little girl Sidehands thought she'd stick to the rules. As if. Two years she was apprenticed, and her nights were spent picking locks and working windows. She enjoyed it, the double life. When Jenny Gartrand was a real bitch about her hair – it looked *fine*, the maids cut it so it was evened out – the night after she stole her pony and her collection of hunting bows and pawned them for a neat profit even after her teacher took his part. Father eventually noticed how much time she spent in the city, but bless his soul he assumed she had a boy there. He awkwardly tried to tell her this wasn't the old Callow anymore and it was fine if she wanted to marry a tradesman for love but she had to be careful about pregnancies and it was both mortifying and the most loving thing she'd ever heard. She did find a few corners with boys she liked, but they sure as Hells weren't tradesmen and there were no wedding bells around the corner. She was fifteen when Sidehands told her she was as good as he could make her, and offered her a seat on the Guild.

"You'll be the only highborn on there, but they'll come around," the old man said. "Hard for any of us to get a legitimate foot in the door to those parties and that'll whet their appetite. Don't let them rob you on their cut, Vivs, they'll need you more than the other way around."

She twitched when he called her that, as she always did. The only part about this she'd regret was that she'd never get a Guild name. She declined, politely, and talked about how her father was getting old and he'd need help running the family properties soon. She made vague assurances she'd be up for jobs now and then, and never followed through on it. The Guild of Thieves had rules, and she'd already gotten what she needed from them. Vivienne spent what she'd earned with thrifty hands on getting a few servant tongues to loosen, and she began to get her dues. There was no Legion garrison in Southpool, it wasn't large or

important enough a city for that, but the roads west went through it and there were a bunch of Legions holed up at the Red Flower Vales. Her first time out on her own, she waited until the wagons with the pay stayed for the night and broke into the Governess' palace. She'd have to be careful, she knew. Sidehands' warnings about mages still rang in her ears. But she needed to know if she could do it.

And Gods, could she.

It was *easier* than it should have been. Her steps more silent, her hands quicker and her ears sharper. She got into the sealed courtyard where the wagons had been left and slid down a pillar from above while the guards talked, hiding under the wagon until they moved on. There were a few left even after the patrol had gone away, but she timed it well and stayed in the shadows. She left with a single silver ingot that night, shoved under her leathers. It was only when word spread that the wagons had been broken in that she realized that she'd done something she shouldn't have been able to. The city was gossiping about the dozen legionaries who'd gotten hanged for putting their hands to the silver. They were the only ones who'd been allowed behind the wards that protected the courtyard, so it must have been one of them who'd stolen an ingot when they wagons were checked later that night. Vivienne's blood went cold, when she realized how close she'd been to being caught. She hadn't thought that the Praesi would be that cautious inside the palace. More importantly, she hadn't triggered the wards.

Vivienne Dartwick knew she was good, but she wasn't literally *magic*.

Except that she was, now. She could hide in broad daylight where there wasn't a single shadow, and when she did there was a word almost on the tip of her tongue. When she cut a purse she could feel the urge to put it away somewhere that didn't quite exist, even if she didn't know how. Yet. She was Named, she came to understand, and when she did she knew exactly who she was. She was the Thief. The Gods Above had looked upon her work and found it worthy of blessing. That knowledge burned within her, the sheer certainty of it. She went back to the palace, and this time it was not a single ingot she took. Governess Ife's entire jewellery box disappeared, and though she had it appraised through a series of intermediaries she never pawned it. Too obvious, it would get back to her. It was when she debated on where to stash it that she grasped her first aspect. Hold. The box went into a place that wasn't, and she returned to work. The Governess had one of the few eldersmen who still tried to oppose her disappeared by the Assassins, and since he had no heir his wealth was now Imperial property. She stole the entire thing, including the cart, just to make a point.

One of the Praesi lickspittles that made up Ife's inner circle had delicacies imported from the Wasteland through the Silver Lake at great expense, and Thief popped caramelized dates into her mouth when strolling rooftops for a month. The Praesi made a ruckus about it, tried to have the captain's ship confiscated, so she went back and stole every single thing in his rooms. The Governess put two thousand aurelii out on contract to Guild of Assassins for the head of the person who'd robbed her, so Vivienne stole the prize money and out of professional courtesy dropped half at a contact point for the same Guild. A very polite note of thanks was nailed to one of the rooftops she liked to pass through, though it did mention if a greater bounty was put out they would still take the contract. Over four months Thief made away with thrice the fine for her mothers' murder, and planned on making it to four when she got her hands on the payment the Governess intended to float the Guild of Smugglers for some illegally-forged swords of dwarven make. Shame it wasn't goblin steel, the sum would have been at least double, but she supposed even Praesi didn't want to come to the attention of the Tower. She'd heard about the Carrion Lord hanging half the staff of an Imperial Governor down south for selling weapon-making licenses without permission.

Sidehands had been right about that, at least.

The warehouse by the docks was without guards, which was the first sign something had gone wrong. Ife wouldn't use city guard for this, but she'd imported some killers that didn't ask questions from the ol' desert back home. Vivienne found the first corpse shoved behind a pile of crates, and frowned at the sight. Messy work, the Soninke must have been stabbed at least a dozen times even if that first throat wound should have killed him outright. That was the sign of a nervous hand, so that meant not the Assassins and not one of the other Praesi making a play. They tended to have a better quality of murderers on the payroll. Three quit leaps had her using the alley walls to get on the roof, which sadly did not have a trapdoor leading down. The Governess wasn't an idiot, just a morally bankrupt murderer sanctioned by an entire nation of morally bankrupt murderers. She shimmied down the side and pried open the planks she'd broken when she'd learned this would be the warehouse, landing on a high beam. Ah, and there was the company. There were fourteen of them, Callowans. Not from Southpool, by the accents. Somewhere down south.

They'd dragged the rest of the guard corpses inside, five piled on near the oil lamp because evidently she was dealing with raging imbeciles. They were also arguing by the three thick trunks where the gold of the Governess was awaiting her tender touch.

"I'm not dragging these fucking things unless we're sure the gold is actually inside, Philip," one of the men said.

"What else would be?" that very Philip replied. "Bloody tulips?"

"We could sell those," another one contributed. "I hear them Praesi nobles go crazy over the fancy flowers."

"I wish I could sell *you*, Jake," the first man complained. "But Hells, how much could a dumb fucker like you even be worth?"

Well, that would have been entertaining if the idiots weren't fucking up a perfectly good theft. If she got close enough she could just Hold the coffers, but she'd have to break out of her stealth aspect to do that and the prize was in the lamplight. At least one of these men was going to keep his eye on the gold. A distraction, then. Vivienne stalked across the angled beam and leapt to a flat one crossing the length of the warehouse, quiet as a cat. Now, how to go about this? Dropping something heavy in the front wouldn't do it, they might panic and try to run with the coffers. Although, it might just be enough to have them bolt. If the corpse outside was any indication, they were fairly nervous about the affair. The lamp light flickered, and Vivienne looked down. The men had gone quiet.

She went very, very still.

Thief was looking down on fourteen corpses. She could see, from how the corpses were positioned, exactly how it had happened. Someone had come close to the first, the slit his throat. Then they'd grabbed the hand of the dying man and put it in the hand of the second, moving from man to man and making a daisy chain of the falling corpses. Fourteen pairs of dead eyes looked down on cut throats, each hand pointing at next man. The beam behind her creaked and she turned in her crouch, dagger in hand. There was a silhouette in the dark she could almost make out the features of. It was a man. She blinked. It was a woman. It was neither and she couldn't remember a single thing about either of the people she'd glimpsed. Not their hair, not the shape of their face not even the colour of their skin.

"Vivienne Dartwick," a voice that was a dozen whispering voices said. "Thief."

Hide, Thief thought. She could still feel the thing's eyes on her. She leapt down and she should have been invisible, but when she headed for the window she was preparing to jump through there was a silhouette leaning against the wall to the side.

"You will survive the night," the monster said.

The shock was enough for her aspect to ebb out.

"You're," she said and bit her tongue.

It waited for her in silence. It felt amused.

"Assassin," she got out.

"You have not followed the rules, Vivienne Dartwick," it said.
"An agreement was made."

"I'm not a member of the Guild of Thieves," she said.

"You are a citizen of the Empire," it said. "You are Named."

"And we all know what you do to heroes," she bit out, because she was going to die anyway wasn't she? "Is that why you're here? To nip me in the bud?"

"Are you?" the thing asked.

She shivered.

"A heroine?" it finished.

It had not come to kill her, she realized. This was an offer. Become a lapdog for the Empress, or else.

"I will not lick the boot on my throat," she hissed.

"Then you will live under it," the monster said. "There are rules. There are consequences. And only one warning."

She blinked and it was gone. She didn't come back home, that night, or the three nights that followed. When she did she saw her father had a healing gash on his throat. His manservant's hand had shaken while shaving him, he said after he finished fussing over her. Vivienne knew better than that. Thief fled the city and did not steal from Praesi again, not even after her father was buried. *Are you?* That was the thing had asked. The words were echoing in her ears, when she heard of the Lone Swordsman and his call for other heroes to join rebellion. She went, against her better judgement. They echoed again in Laure, that night the devil came calling under moonlight.

She was not so certain of the answer as she'd once been.

Background

"The true tragedy of Evil is that it is not absolute. That even the worst of men can love their children, be moved to kindness. Damnation is earned piecemeal."

– King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

Hakram had grown to rely on the sharper perception his Name lent him. Often he used it in fights, to read the strikes of an opponent and brutally capitalize on them, but now and then it had more mundane use. Like telling when Archer was getting restless and about to 'request' they spar. At the first sign tonight of it he'd immediately sought out Masego to suggest they play shatranj, giving him an excuse to avoid the solid hour-long beating that would have ensued otherwise. He wasn't particularly proud of it, but dignity was a worthwhile trade for lack of bruises. The tall orc glanced at the board and moved his chancellor to threaten a mage. The Soninke sitting across him radiated displeasure at the sight. It was somewhat amusing, Adjutant thought, that transitioning into the Hierophant had done absolutely nothing to improve Masego's skill at the game.

"You're cheating," Hierophant accused, sounding deeply offended.

Adjutant offered a mocking hint of fangs, knowing the other man would know exactly what it meant. The mage was familiar with orcs. That Masego was entirely convinced that his superior breadth of knowledge should make him the better player at what was widely considered a game for scholars and strategists was one of the orc's petty delights. He always took it so personally when he lost.

"You should call it a draw then," Archer suggested eagerly.

The ochre-skinned woman was messily sprawled across three armless chairs which she had very clearly stolen from Juniper's command tent. If she'd portrayed boredom any more clearly, it would have qualified as sorcery.

"I'm not going to lose," Masego said through gritted teeth.

"Of course not," Hakram said, fangs bared just a little more.

Archer loudly sighed.

"We're at war," she complained. "How can this be so horribly dull? All we do is march all day."

"Isn't that what war is?" Thief drawled. "Months of tedium, then a day of terror."

The orc glanced at the fourth person in the tent. He'd been somewhat surprised, when she'd joined them. Since their conversation in Laure, the Thief had made a point of avoiding his presence. Only after Arcadia had she begun to shed the habit, occasionally joining these informal gatherings. She still gave him dark looks, when she thought he wasn't looking. That was fine. Given enough time, Catherine would pull her into her circle as she had the rest of them. Should this not occur, she would likely turn her blade on him first. As he'd meant to ensure, when

putting fear in her. A little discord within their band was worth that additional precaution in case she turned on them. Hierophant moved forward a footman to protect the mage and Hakram snorted, taking another footman with one of his. The chain of captures that would ensure from that would leave Masego down a footman and with a rider unprotected.

"Been in a lot of wars, have you?" Archer challenged.

Conflict, Adjutant had learned, was how the woman related to others. Considering some of the things he'd heard of Refuge and the nature of Lady Ranger's tutelage, there was sense in it. The Waning Woods saw more monsters than balls. Masego had passed whatever bar Archer set when they'd gone south to stir trouble for the Diabolist, though with how she picked on the mage it could be hard to tell. There'd been difference, though. She acted as a nuisance still, but the barbs were no longer probing. When it came to the orc himself, acceptance had come after the Battle of Marchford. He'd held in the face of the demon, which had gained him esteem. She thought much like an orc, in those matters. It made her easy to like. Thief, however, had never truly fought at their side. Her intervention in Arcadia, while crucial, had not been the kind of contribution Archer recognized. That would be trouble, he'd thought more than once. Thief was not a fighter, or even an assassin. Her talents were more indirect, and that perspective seemed bound to her Name. The Callowan would not change, and neither would Archer. He'd have to finagle a middle-ground for them to meet, before this became a true issue.

"This makes two," Thief replied easily. "Stuck to the last one longer than you did, the way I hear it."

On the other side, Hakram thought, but the woman had probably noticed that this kind of distinction didn't really matter to Archer. People out of Refuge did not seem to care about those lines, much as it was said the Lady of the Lake did not. They were islands unto themselves, bound to others only as long as it suited them. It still impressed the orc that anyone would have the balls to 'retire' from the Calamities, considering the kind of monsters that made them up.

"There's only so much in Callow to fight for," Archer shrugged.

As good as a concession of the point, for her. The subject change that followed confirmed it.

"What the Hells is Catherine doing, anyway?" she asked.

"Trying not to yell at her generals," Masego said, superbly tactless.

Archer glanced at Hakram, and his brow rose to invite her to speak her mind.

"Aren't you usually there for that stuff?" she said.

"Routine reports," the orc gravelled. "We've yet to encounter any fae on our march south. This is more diplomacy than military matter. She grants them time to imply value."

The woman wrinkled her nose.

"There has to be something at least vaguely interesting happening in those," she said. "She doesn't let me come."

"She's afraid you're going to kill someone," Masego candidly said.

Directed at someone else it might have been taken a slight, but Archer's pride let these kind of things slide right off and she laughed instead. It was, Hakram suspected, one of the reasons she was so powerful. Will, strength of belief – these were the traits that strengthened Named. He was never so sharp and strong as when he carried out Catherine's will. She'd told him, once, that Lord Black had taught her it was certainty that set apart Named from mortals. He'd committed this to memory, as there were few in the Empire that understood *namelore* better than the Carrion Lord. Unshakeable pride was a different path to that peak, it was true, but the results spoke for themselves.

"That commander from the Watch is bound to be pretty though," Archer mused. "He could probably take a light spar."

No, Hakram thought. *He most definitely cannot*. He'd seen members of the Watch in combat, and they were not comparable to Named. They stood head and shoulders above even the strongest orcs he'd met, and were swifter than goblins on foot. But they were not match to even fledgling Named, as individuals, and Archer was no fledgling. Hakram glanced at the board, noting Hierophant seemed smug. Ah, he meant to trade a mage for a tower. The orc deftly moved the tower across the board, threatening the blind man's tyrant and pulling out the smugness by the roots. Ah, that never got old.

"Duchess Kegan might take offense to that," Thief said. "She's famously prickly, even for a Deoraithe."

Adjutant had never quite managed to nail down where her accent came from, in Callow. The intonation was too faint, as if she'd been trained out of it. That was interesting, in and of itself. It would mean she'd had a tutor, and this meant wealth or status. Now and then Thief slipped and spoke knowledge that was not common, as she just had. The Duchy of Daoine was deeply isolationist, and it was unlikely anyone but nobles or regionally-connected merchants would have heard rumours about the character of its duchess. She was not a well-known figure, in Callow. Archer fluidly rose and came to stand behind Hierophant,

leaning her elbows on his shoulders. Her scarf dipped down, covering his nose. It was hard to tell whether the contact or the obstructed vision irritated him more. The Soninke's hand rose, sorcery flaring around it, but she batted it away.

"Careful with the scarf," Archer said. "It has sentimental value."

"So do my shoulders," Masego muttered. "Yet you paw at them."

One of these days, Hakram thought, he was going to realize she wouldn't do things like this nearly as often if he didn't keep being irked by them. Adjutant had no intention of telling him, though. He only had so many sources of entertainment.

"Priest's threatening your knight," she said, pointing at the board.

Hakram's eyes narrowed. He was certain Hierophant would not have noticed otherwise.

"That's a mage," Masego said, but he was beaming.

"In Praes, maybe," Archer replied, rolling her eyes.

Thief moved to stand behind the orc. He did not tense, though this took an exertion of will.

"The scarf," the short-haired woman said. "Mercantis weave. Not common in Callow. Would fetch gold for sure."

"Not for sale," the other woman replied flatly.

Hakram glanced at her, and took a footman while she was too distracted to advise Masego.

"Sentimental value, huh," Thief drawled. "Is Mercantis where you're from?"

The orc kept his eyes on the board so he would not betray his interest. He'd never seen anyone with skin the same tone as Archer's, before meeting her. He doubted there more than a dozen across the entirety of Calernia. Her ancestors, if not her, must have come from across the Tyrian Sea. She was clearly not Yan Tei, so likely one of the Ashuran trade ships. No one but the Baalite Hegemony and the Yan Tei knew the route to safely cross the famously storm-prone sea. Not since the Miezans had been undone by the Licerian Wars, anyway.

"You could say that," Archer said. "It's the first thing I ever owned. A gift from the Lady."

The orc's fangs ground against each other, the way they always did when one spoke of slavery even in a way so indirect. It was

an open secret that people were one of the many commodities that could be obtained in the City of Bought and Sold, though the consortium ruling it did not publicly endorse the practice.

"Steady there, big guy," Archer said, tone almost fond as she looked at him. "That score has long been settled."

"There should never have been a score at all," Hakram gravelled.

"Every nation on Calernia practiced slavery at some point," Masego absent-mindedly said. "I imagine Praes still would, if it had never come under Miezan occupation. The labour demanded of their subjects by the first Tyrants were essentially that, regardless. Father always said the true mortar of the Tower was hypocrisy."

The blind man paused.

"It is a metaphor," he said, just in case anyone had thought otherwise.

Hakram sighed. Behind him, the Thief snorted.

"You're not very good at people, are you?" she said.

"I know more about anatomy than any of you," Hierophant replied, mildly offended.

Three half-smiles bloomed, and for a heartbeat it felt like they were more than a set of strangers following Catherine Foundling. Then Thief drummed her fingers on his shoulder, and the orc's tongue ran against his fangs. Archer caught it, and grinned.

"Oh my," she said. "Someone's unsettled. Now there's a rare treat."

"It's like he's afraid to give me a chance," the Callowan drawled. "Keep playing, Adjutant. It's not like I'm going to *choke* you."

Hakam's brow creased, and though he looked at the board his thoughts were elsewhere. She was, evidently, settling their earlier dispute. This seemed directed at him personally, and was being done in a manner Archer had made clear was acceptable within the bounds of their group. Thief was either clever enough to rebel in a way that was within the dotted lines, or she was getting comfortable enough with them to pursue a grudge. The former was a warning sign, but set forward cunningly enough there was little he could do about it. The latter was something to encourage. He somehow got the feeling that she'd been aware of the difficulty this would pose him before she'd even moved. Troublesome. Both Archer and Hierophant were, to put it kindly, less than socially adept. That had made it simple to gently steer

them away from conflicts with each other. Thief would not be so straightforward to deal with, it seemed. It would not do to forget she had been part of a group of Named before, and stood one of its few survivors. The orc moved a footman forward. Masego reached for his mage, but Archer clucked her tongue.

"You're opening a lane for his tower," she said. "Move your footman instead."

The orc gave a hint of fangs again to unsettle Hierophant.

"Is she playing, or are you?" he asked.

The Soninke's brows creased behind his cloth. Then he moved the footman.

"You're trying to provoke me," he breathed, surprised. "Archer, are we winning?"

The ochre-skinned woman glanced at the board.

"Kingtip in ten," she said. "He got sloppy."

"Where did you even learn to play?" Hakram said.

"Hunter was mad for it," she said. "Also terrible, and willing to bet taking off clothes."

"*Hunter?*" Thief said, sounding surprised. "I don't meant to speak ill of the dead, but--"

"Yeah, he was pretty fucking awful at it," Archer snorted. "I had him streak through the woods once. Almost got eaten by basilisk, it was hilarious."

"You sound like you were friends," Masego noted. "You're not angry we tried to kill him?"

He paused.

"Twice, I believe," he finished. "I'm not certain if they count as separate attempts."

"He picked the fight," Archer shrugged. "His fault if he lost. The Lady's always been clear that once we leave Refuge we're on our own. Some of her students have killed each other before, after getting out. She teaches heroes and villains both."

"Pragmatic of you," Thief said, and it did not sound like a compliment. "Admittedly the Lone Swordsman's band was less than harmonious."

Hakram slid his chancellor across the board. Archer didn't even bother to ask before reaching over Masego and threatening his tyrant with a tower.

"Never met him," she said. "But Catherine says he was a real prick."

"He was not an easy man to like," Thief conceded. "Whatever forged his Name must have been rather unpleasant, and left marks."

"I found the Bard the most grating," Hakram said. "Smug. Like a goblin without the redeeming qualities."

The fingers withdrew from his shoulder. Interesting. They'd had word that Lord Black was fighting a Wandering Bard in the Free Cities, though she was said to have different appearance. Tension there? They'd never displayed any during their encounters, but as her Name stated the Bard came and went. She'd been noticeably absent at the Battle of Liesse, for one.

"I hear she goes by a different name, these days," Thief said quietly. "Don't be fooled by the drinking and the jokes. She's dangerous. Got into William's head at the end, and not in a nice way."

"Father and Uncle Amadeus are fighting her," Masego said. "She won't be the first bardic Name they kill."

"I'm not sure how doable that actually is," Thief said. "Knew her for the better part of a year, and I never once saw her take a wound she wasn't directly responsible for."

That, Hakram thought, was disquieting. No Name could truly make someone untouchable, so there must have been flaws and restrictions, but it was still something of note. Something to plan for. They'd not seen the Bard since the end of the Liesse Rebellion, but that did not mean they never would. There were no true books of namelore, for no Named would everwillingly pen their own limits and weaknesses, but the orc had found legends of some use in this regard. It was difficult to obtain volumes while on campaign, but the war come to an end eventually. His aspect should allow him to Find something worth the perusal, given enough time. Adjutant felt a bundle of power kin to his own approach and turned to watch the tent's flap be pushed aside in time for Catherine to join them. It was always a surprise to see how short she truly was, though he knew better than to remark on it.

Her skin, always tan, had grown darker during the march through Summer. Her face had been sharp since he'd first lain eyes on her, but it was even sharper now. Had been ever since she'd killed the Duke of Violent Squalls, and he felt the old well of

pride whenever he thought of that. A few loose strands of hair swept over her forehead, and though the others would not have noticed he saw she was tired. It lay in the way her eyes were tighter, more guarded. As if she expected someone to take advantage of it. She was also in a foul mood, but that was made rather obvious by the way she glared at him and flipped him a golden aurelius. He caught it smoothly.

"Don't be smug about it," the Vicequeen of Callow warned him.

"You froze the table," he stated.

"I froze the table," she sighed.

Archer's snort echoed loudly.

"I had it under control, before Masego did his heart shenanigans," she complained. "Now it's like I'm starting from scratch."

"I deeply apologize for increasing your power tenfold," Hierophant huffed.

Catherine's eyes swept around the tent, coming to rest on the chairs Archer had been lounging on earlier.

"So that's where those went," she mused. "Archer?"

"It could have been Thief," the culprit protested.

"If it was they'd be in the bag," Catherine said. "Although, Thief, if I have to hear Ratface whine about the rate our paring knives are disappearing at one more time I will be *cross*."

"I've too many anyway," Thief drawled, retreating from his back. "A pleasant meeting, Squire?"

She grabbed a chair and slumped onto it.

"I swear, it's like the Gods made a fucking condescension tree and Kegan dropped from the branches fully grown," she savagely said. "And Ranker's actually worse, if you can believe it. Not even Robber enjoys being a prick that much."

From the corner of his eye Hakram saw Thief hide a smile. Catherine had always had a way with words. The way Nauk told it, when they'd first met she'd been so bluntly insulting in Kharsum after he'd provoked her that he'd almost been speechless.

"You should kill one," Archer suggested. "People always get more respectful after that."

"Don't tempt me," Catherine muttered. "What are we playing? And tell me someone has wine."

"Shatranj," Masego said. "I am crushing Hakram."

The dark-haired woman glanced at the board.

"Are you?" she said. "Can't tell. Never learned how to play."

"Would have thought the Carrion Lord would have slipped that in between lessons," Thief drawled. "Seems up his alley."

"He actually hates the game," Catherine mused. "Has a whole speech and everything."

"We can teach you, then," Adjutant said, and hastily began to put the pieces back to their starting position.

Archer had been right. Another eight movements and he was done. Hierophant's immediate protests that he'd been about to win filled the room, though not as loudly as Archer's laughter. Thief produced a wineskin with a flourish of the wrist, and seemed deeply amused by the fact that no one bothered to ask where she'd obtained it. The Woe, was it? That could wait until the light of day. They were due, he thought, the occasional warm evening.

Fledged

"To follow a principle is to ascribe value to it, and value always has worth that can be quantified. Is to value quantifiable worth above all, therefore, not to follow the greatest of all principles?"

– Extract from "Bought and Sold", a collection of the teachings of the Merchant Prince Irenos, founder of Mercantis

It was the second time Indrani was made to serve at an auction of the Closed Circle and she knew better than to hope it would be the last. She was *exotic*. The word came even more often than *pretty* and *mannerly* in the mouths of Honoured Guests, as if the colour of her skin had made her some wild animal instead of a nine-year-old girl. Merchant Lord Septim had been complimented too many times on how much of a coup acquiring her had been for Indrani to ever think he would not continue volunteering her as a servant for the evenings. It was rare occasion, at least. The Closed Circle never held auction more than once a year, and it was not guaranteed to. The nature of what was put to auction forbade it from being regular occurrence. The masked men and women of the Circle called it 'an auction for which that cannot be bought' but Indrani had already grown used to the way Mercantians slathered drama over everything like honeyed glaze. The Closed Circle, as far she understood, put up for trade things that couldn't be bought with gold. It was barter the way slaves like her did in the pens, but with enough goldleaf and expensive wine involved they got to pretend it was different.

She hadn't been there when the goods for auction were announced, but by milling around serving drinks she got to overhear enough conversations to piece together a few. There was a letter that could ignite war in the Free Cities, the secret to earn the love a Proceran princess and the greatest shame of a Callowan baron. Strangers things too, a glimmer of Arcadian moon and a sword without a blade forged by a Praesi emperor. The last, she knew, had been traded at the last auction. She'd not seen it, but they said the Warlock had been there looking for an ancient song that revealed the lay of some lesser Hells. He'd offered something from the vaults of the Tower in exchange, which had gotten the Merchant Lords excited. The Dread Empire sat on the greatest troves of treasures in Calernia, it was said, but these days rarely took them out from the warded rooms where they were hidden away from Creation. Indrani didn't give a fuck about what the Easterners got up to in their deserts, but the owners being in a good mood was good for her as well.

Septim wouldn't sell her until she'd flowered, he'd already said as much, but when he felt generous she got a few hours out in the city instead of remaining bound to his estate. Once that had been one of her rare delights, but tonight the notion she might see her leash loosened felt empty. Indrani had been careful, hoarding what she could and stealing when she was sure she could get away with it – the trick was to steal from free servants, there was almost never a tracking rune on their possessions – and paid for one a questor to find her parents. She'd had to go to the lower city to find one whose fees she could afford, but after two years of scrounging finally she had managed. It had been pointless. Her mother was already dead, assassinated as part of a squabble between Merchant Lords. Her father had been sold in Ashur and died in a mine collapse as a 'free' member of its lowest citizenship tier. The questor told her that was a committee's fault, higher tier citizens debating for a week on whether it was worth digging out the people in the collapsed shaft or not.

Eventually, lack of air had settled the question where words failed.

Indrani wondered if she was supposed to swear vengeance on their behalf. Feuds were not rare between Mercantians, though always short-lived, but there were Callowan and Praesi slaves in the pens that still stole knives to kill each other over things their peoples had done hundreds of years ago. There wasn't much, she thought, to seek vengeance for. Her father she'd never even met, and she barely remembered her mother. Warmth and the smell of spices, that was all. The name she'd been given by the woman had been kept since Merchant Lord Septim thought it would make her more *authentic*, but the way it was spoken was different from what little she remembered. It was spoken in Lower Miezan, not whatever tongue was spoken by the people of her parents across the Tyrian Sea. All the girl could muster was a vague sorrow at

would could have been. It was left formless because her life already had form: she was to sing, to learn the Three Dances and the Seven Tongues and earn great profit for the man who'd snatched her from her mother's arms at the cost of a small fortune.

She'd gone quiet and her smile had lapsed as she thought, she realized. Indrani force da cheerful smile and dearly hoped no one who had rivalry with Septim had seen her. All it would take was a single comment to humiliate the Merchant Lord and she would have earned a caning. Luck might be in her favour, for there were few Mercantians at Closed Circle auctions. A third of the people in attendance were fat Merchant Lords and Ladies, but the Consortium kept light presence at events like this. The Merchant Princes of Mercantis had long ago ordered as much, to ensure it would be powerful foreigners that came to the City of Bought and Sold for the ineffable prizes offered. Indrani, a sweet smile painted on her face, presented her silver platter to the closest Honoured Guest. A woman, though not like she'd ever seen before. She had the skin of the honey-coloured Yan Tei but her face was different and her ears were pointed. Her red dress alone was proof she was wealthy enough to be here, silks that could only be had from Praes and Ashur. The rough leather boots stood out from the perfectly presented rest, a stain on the jewels and beauty. The Honoured Guest considered her for a long moment before claiming a goblet of Helikean pale.

"Well now, a *yamin-ine*," she said, "Where did the fat ones get theirs hands on one of you?"

"This one does not understand what you speak of," Indrani replied.

"I imagine your parents made it through on a Baalite ship before Fate fucked them bad enough you ended up here," the Honoured Guest mused. "Your peoples don't often cross the Tyrian Sea, girl. They never learned the routes."

"This one was born in Mercantis, Honoured Guest," Indrani said.

"You can drop the slave talk," the woman said, rolling her eyes. "And that platter as well. You're interesting enough an oddity you'll be fetching me drinks for the rest of this bore. Send your owner to me if they object."

The slave swallowed noisily. She wasn't an idiot. She knew there were men and women that were... interested in girls her age. She was pricey enough a commodity that Septim had never made her available for those kinds of deals, but for an Honoured Guest? No one got in this hall without being powerful enough to curry favour with. Could she run? The rune carved into the back of her neck would start boiling her blood if she went too far from the anchor, but it might be worth it if she could avoid this. The

woman drained the cup and dropped it on the platter, reaching for another. She'd just drank, Indrani knew, a vintage worth a boy of working age in good health. Like it was water. The waste was like a slap in the face, utter disregard for the wheels of value and interest she'd been taught ruled the world.

"Whoever decided there's need to mingle for an hour after the prizes are announced should be shot," the Honoured Guest sighed. "I'd burn the invitations if they didn't occasionally have useful stuff."

"The Closed Circle is pleased to provide for all your needs," Indrani said.

The woman snorted.

"Did you know your people abduct the *salamdeul* who wander too close to the border?" she said. "Rip out the hearts in some pretty grisly rituals to the Gods. Having one of you in slave livery is like putting ribbons on a tiger."

"This one knows not what you speak of," Indrani said, desperately reaching for the phrases she'd been taught. "Are you enjoying the auction, Honoured Guest?"

"Praesi highborn speak just like that," the woman said. "They put accents on different parts, but you're coming from Baalite bastard talk and they from Wasteland tongues. Their nobles think they're being distinguished, but they forget Miezian envoys were always slaves. Mercantis was founded by exiles, you see, you keep the traditions closer to true."

"This one was not taught history," Indrani tried.

The Honoured Guest smiled strangely.

"I know a man who once said ignorance of precedent is the doom of empires," she said. "Though you're too young for romance, I suppose."

The girl hid her relief as well she could. Those particular duties would not be asked of her, it looked like. The stranger patted her shoulder as one would pat a pet. Some owners were like that, liked to think of themselves as benevolent.

"Most of the time, more trouble than it's worth," the woman said. "It's the exceptions that fuck you, mark my words."

"This one will, Honoured Guest," Indrani replied.

It was toothless enough, as far as babbles went, and she'd been forced to smile and nod and much uglier stuff.

"Ranger," the woman said. "Call me Ranger."

The slave stiffened. That was not a name, it was a *Name*. The half-drunk guest at her side had been granted mantle by the Gods themselves, whether Above or Below. She stood in the presence of greatness, and greatness was helping itself to another cup of wine and downing it so quickly she must barely taste it. Indrani glimpsed a tall silhouette coming from behind and felt cold fear course her veins. Merchant Lord Septim was young, barely thirty, and had yet to gain the fat that Mercantians influential enough to vie for the title of Merchant Prince uniformly wore. His tan face was leathery and desiccated, a match for those hungry empty eyes that she had learned to fear. Whims were rare in the man, and generosity ever passing.

"Lady Ranger," Septim smiled. "I see you've taken a shine to my Indrani."

The honey-skinned woman glanced at the Merchant Lord like he was waste scrapped off her boots.

"Speak in my presence again and I'll slit your throat," she mildly said.

The Merchant Lord paled.

"Shoo, copper-counter," Ranger said. "My patience is already running out."

Indrani did not smile. When the Honoured Guest was gone, she would still be a slave – and one who had witnessed Septim's casual humiliation. There was a beating for her in it, waiting around the corner. The memory of the barely-veiled fury on her owner's face wouldn't do much to take away the dull throb of a caning's aftermath.

"Merchant Lord Septim is said to be the foremost candidate for the princesship, in a decade," Indrani warned quietly.

Ranger chuckled.

"I could open the little shit up from balls to throat and all the Consortium would do is send me a bill," she said. "Everything's for sale here. Even the city, famously, though no one's ever had the coin for it."

The girl did not reply, for she had nothing to say. Mighty as the Named was, she would be gone soon enough. The sun set every night, no matter how warm, and never rose twice the same. Attachment to the transient was the way of dead slaves.

"Wekesa's little trinket should be interesting, but the loafer in the Tower wouldn't let anything too useful of her grasp," the Honoured Guest said. "The only thing worth a second glance here is the invitation."

"I know not of what you speak, Lady Ranger," Indrani admitted.

"A written invitation to Skade, made from the soul of some poet the Winter Court took fancy to," the woman explained. "I could carve my way into Arcadia, but that takes a while, and my gate's even more finicky."

"This one was unaware that your hallowed self kept friendship with the fae," the girl said.

"Oh, I don't," Ranger smiled. "You might say I'm fond of their jewellery, but that'll have to wait until the seasons change."

Indrani smiled as if she understood. The woman seemed amused but not fooled.

"So what did they train you for?" she asked.

"This one has been taught to sing, and still learns the Three Dances and the Seven Tongues," she said.

Lady Ranger laughed loudly and unapologetically, as if it was the funniest thing she'd ever heard.

"Gods, *singing*," she gasped. "Child, your people gouged out the eyes of a Minister of the Left and sent them to his Emperor along a demand for half his southern territories. My father sacked Sing Du twice, burned An Yang to the ground and still lost to the Striped Fleet. There was a century where the Ashokas bled the high chief of the Onogur as their *coronation ceremony*. A drop of your blood has more war in it than half this continent put together."

She might as well have been speaking in tongues, for all the difference it made. Names of peoples and cities beyond a sea but a handful knew how to cross, never to be seen or even heard of again. What did it matter to Indrani that some kingdom she'd never heard of and she shared the smallest sliver of kinship with was mighty? She had never left Mercantis, hadn't even seen most the city. The stranger was marching in with her colourful stories, and by night's end would march out and leave a mess behind her – a mess Indrani would pay for. She hated that, hated it like poison. She also craved it. It was the difference between one who had power and one who did not.

"None of those names mean anything here," Indrani harshly said. "My blood even less."

"So you have some fire in you," Ranger smiled. "Good. We've got some fate, you and I, but I've no patience for hollow dolls."

"We have never met before," Indrani said.

"My father would never have been exiled, had he not lost to your people," the Honoured Guest shrugged. "Would never have met my mother. That gets you a second look, at least."

"I am not for sale," she bitterly said. "Will not be for years yet."

"What the lords of this place deem to be law matters very little to me," the woman said. "Have you ever used a weapon?"

Indrani shook her head.

"Mercantians do not keep war slaves, my lady," she said. "Only Stygians do. To lay hands on a blade here is killing offense, save for the pit fighters."

"Let's see if you have it in you, then," the Lady Ranger said. "Follow."

They were noticed. Indrani felt like flinching. Slaves should not be noticed, no good ever came of it. The Honoured Guest elbowed aside a dark-skinned Praesi who bowed and offered her manifold apologies, not that she bothered to listen, and she snatched a hilt without a blade from atop marble pedestal. She pressed it into Indrani's hands, who winced as she held it. Moments passed without anything more than the sensation of cool metal against her palm. The absence stung harder than she'd thought it would, and the girl damned herself twice for having hoped. *Hope is the bitter brew, hope is the usher of despair. One day at a time, never looking back or ahead. I will survive this.*

"Sorcerous was a real prick anyway, as I hear it," the Lady Ranger mused and dropped the hilt back on the pedestal.

"Wasteland aristocrats always like to talk about sorcery being the best thing the Gods bothered to shit out, like it ever saved them from a knife in the throat. Steel, girl, always wins. Remember that."

Indrani nodded and the worthless advice and followed the madwoman. They came to stand in front of another pedestal, this one bearing a horn bow with carved images along the length of the arc. The eyes of everyone in the room were on them by now. There would be no escaping the consequences.

"Lycaonese," Ranger told her. "They've always liked these, nothing quite like them to kill ratlings from a wall. This little piece must be older than the Principate, back when the Iron Kings still ruled."

She'd spoken with a degree of respect, but handled the bow like it was a tool instead of a literally priceless artefact. She strung it casually and pulled, eyeing the bend with a critical eye before handing it to Indrani. The girl's fingers closed

around the bow and found it fit just right. Perfectly, as if it had been made for her hand. In the background she heard a masked woman of the Circle tell Ranger it had been crafted by Peerless Artisan and the enchantments on it would never lapse, but the words passed her by without taking hold. Indrani's eyes remained on the bow and she let instincts she should not have guide her hands. She looked ahead and pulled the string, feeling the weight of an arrow that did not exist take hold. It felt... it felt like what her mother should have felt like. Coming home. Closing a circle. She shivered, and only returned to herself when the Honoured Guest put a hand on her shoulder. The woman leaned close.

"If you could loose an arrow at anyone, who would it be?" Ranger whispered.

Indrani was careful not to look for Septim, not to remember painful throbs and bruises that were allowed to swell before magic was taken to them. The Named chuckled.

"And after him, the rest?" she said.

Indrani slowly shook her head.

"A debt," she said. "Not a cause."

Ranger smiled and took the bow from her hands, placing it back on the pedestal. The absence left her hollow.

"What's your name, girl?"

"Indrani," she replied.

"Indrani," the Ranger repeated, mulling over the word. "It will do for now. Come along, duckling. We're leaving."

"I'm not for sale," the slave replied, alarmed.

"Consider this your first lesson, duckling," the Lady of the Lake said. "Rules should only be a concern when someone is able to enforce them upon you."

Indrani saw a wild glint in those eyes, and her fate writ in it. *Never looking back or ahead*, she thought.

She smiled, and for the first time in a very long while it was genuine.

Prodigy

"No man in Creation is so dangerous as a well-meaning fool."
– Dread Empress Regalia II

When he'd been nine years old, Masego had seen the end of the world. He thought of that, sometimes, at gatherings like this one. When making meaningless small talk with strangers, wondering if they had any idea about how fragile everything around them truly was. That the world was nothing but the whim of greater beings, apt to be snuffed out the moment they learned what they wanted. But all he saw in the eyes of the highborn was hunger and ambition, and could there ever be anything more boring than that? The silhouettes melded into each other, a hundred boys and girls cut from the same dull cloth. Even those with a measure of the Gift were blind, like they were just refusing to see what was around them. They might as well be animals or statues of clay, but still he had to stand and smile and pretend he'd remember their names if he ever met them again. He usually didn't. Papa chided him over that, said connections were always useful, but Father just laughed. Still made him come, though, even if it was only a few times a year.

"- a pureblood Liessen charger," the girl said, and Masego only now noticed she'd been talking this whole time. "Getting her across the Wasaliti was difficult, of course, but my family is not without friends."

The boy squinted through his glasses.

"I thought there was a decree about the Thirteenth Legion getting first pick of mounts out of the provinces," he said.

Father had arranged for a tutor to teach him about these things, which had only succeeded in motivating him to learn how to craft illusions. If he slept through the lessons it was easier to stay up late working on his own projects. Uncle Amadeus had called him worse than his father when he'd learned, but it had sounded like a compliment. His uncle did that a lot, say things he didn't mean while smiling. It had taken Masego a while to understand how that worked, and even now he found the man's face hard to read sometimes. It was like he was *trying* to make things confusing. The girl, whose name he didn't even try to remember because he was pretty sure he hadn't been paying attention when she'd introduced herself in the first place, laughed like he'd said something funny and put her hand on his arm. She had warm fingers, he noted, but he didn't enjoy strangers touching him. Well, she was Soninke and highborn so she was probably clean at least. Still, since he'd turned twelve people kept pawing at him at these receptions. He really wished they'd stop, or at least tell him why.

"What do such trifles mean to people like us, Masego?" she smiled, cheeks dimpling.

He forced himself not to squint again. It sounded like she broke the law a lot, which was kind of stupid. Yeah, Father had told him that those didn't really apply to him until Uncle Amadeus

said they did, but that was just him. This girl would probably get hanged if people knew, so why was she telling him?

"Horses are nice," he tried.

The girl blinked in confusion and withdrew her hand. That was his chance, he decided. If you didn't retreat early when people got grabby they'd follow you all night.

"I think I hear someone calling me," he hastily said, and fled before she could reply.

He was pretty sure this was the city home of the High Lord of Thalassina – though why someone who lived by the sea would want a house in Ater he had no idea – so hopefully he hadn't just been rude to a relative of... whoever the High Lord was. There was an S in there, he was pretty sure, maybe more than one. The whole place was pointlessly large and dripping with gold, jewels and weird wood Papa told him was worth more than either, but worse of all it was filled with people. So many people. More than two hundred, though there were a lot of servants and supposedly those didn't count. Masego declined to take one of the bits of meat pastry from a plate, since he'd been told those were poisoned, and discretely tried to find either his fathers. They weren't anywhere in sight, but there were three floors and a rooftop garden so that didn't mean much. Before he could embark on that journey of discovery, he found himself cornered by another girl and what looked like a pack of minions. Another Soninke. He squinted, pretty sure he'd seen this one before. Three months ago, when High Lady Tasia Something had the party with the magic lightshow? That had been very interesting, though people kept trying to talk to him during. Which, rude. And they said *he* had bad manners.

"Lord Masego," the girl smiled. "A pleasure to see you again. You so rarely come to these little evenings."

Shit, he was supposed to know who she was.

"Oh hello," he said, and after a moment found a clever ruse. "... You."

Flawless. He was going to get away with this cleanly.

"A very familiar way to refer to Lady Akua," one of the minions said.

The boy frowned.

"I thought minions weren't supposed to talk when important people do," he pointed out. "Father says they used to execute people for that."

The minion who'd spoken, some Taghreb, went pale at that. Damn it, Masego hadn't meant to make him feel bad about his manners. Now he felt like an ass.

"It's all right," the boy reassured the stranger. "It's just an old custom. Those aren't very important."

The Akua girl's smile didn't change, but he got the impression he'd said something wrong. Was it because she was pretty? Pretty girls always had these expectations about things he should be saying but no one had ever written those down, as far as he knew, and why would people not do that? It was just bad scholarship, honestly.

"A shame you believe so, my lord," she said.

Masego frowned.

"Why?" he asked. "Do you want him to get killed? That's a little rude to say right in front of him."

The Soninke girl looked bemused, and also a little pained, but before she could say anything Masego felt a giant palm settle over his head and relief wash over him.

"Aunt Sabah," he breathed. "Wait, careful with the hair."

The big woman grinned and ruffled his braids even as he squirmed.

"Making friends, Masego?" she teased.

"I'm not sure," he said. "I think I insulted them but I don't know how."

He leaned closer to his aunt and whispered.

"They must have very thin skin," he gravely told her.

He offered the girl and her minions a smile after that, but some of them looked angry for some reason.

"Lady Captain," the girl said, and bowed.

"Sahelian," Aunt Sabah replied. "Growing into a proper little lady, aren't we?"

"I am ever my mother's daughter," the girl smiled.

Oh, Masego thought, they must be friends. Now he felt kind of bad he hadn't remembered her name. Aunt Sabah took her hand off his tresses and patted him.

"One of High Lord Idriss' mages prepares to make a demonstration in the gardens," she said. "Your father sent me to get you."

The moment magic was mentioned he forgot all about the other people, perking up.

"Skill display or a formula reveal?" he asked. "Because they're not usually very good at the displays."

"Formula," the big woman said. "Come on, we don't want to miss it."

Masego wasn't a savage, so he remembered to wave at the girl and the minions before he followed his aunt to the stairs.

"You don't have any idea who that was, do you?" she asked.

The boy glared.

"Of course I do," he said. "It was..."

Shit, he'd forgotten her name again. *Come on, Masego, she just told you.*

"Lady Ubua," he said, pretending he was sure.

Aunt Sabah's shoulders shook like she was holding something in. She must have eaten too much.

"Yes," she said, voice tight. "That is exactly correct, and you should always call her that."

Masego let out a sigh of relief when she was looking away. *Ubua, Ubua, Ubua*, he said in his head. He couldn't forget, just in case Papa asked him later. They slowed when they got to the second floor, and his aunt steered him to the side. He was a little confused as to why, at first, but then he saw Uncle Amadeus talking with some important-looking Taghreb. His uncle was very pale, though Father had told him it was because he was a Duni – which wasn't a disease, even if it sounded like it – and he usually looked sinister but tonight he was smiling and standing real close to the other man. They must have been old friends, he thought. The Taghreb was smiling very widely and his hands were shaking with excitement.

"Brat," his uncle lazily said, turning to him. "Heading up for the reveal?"

Masego nodded.

"Do you think people will try to talk to me?" he asked. "Because they did last time, and it was very tedious."

Uncle Amadeus' lips quirked.

"Stay close to me and I'll serve as your guard," he suggested.

Masego beamed. His uncle turned to the Taghreb.

"Think on it, Lord Baneg," he said. "It would be my pleasure to arrange it."

The Taghreb said his courtesies very quickly, bowed and left.

"What were you talking about?" the boy asked.

"Giant spiders," his uncle said. "Lord Baneg seems to have an interest in seeing them up close."

Masego hummed in approval. As a provably repeated phenomenon of unclear sorcerous origin that displayed manifestations going outside the bounds of the classical table of elements, the giant spiders under Ater were a fascinating study subject.

"Is he a mage, then?" he asked.

Uncle Amadeus patted his shoulder.

"No," he smiled coldly. "No he is not."

"He must be a great scholar," Masego mused.

It wasn't people's fault, that they weren't born with the Gift. Yes, it made them kind of useless and ignorant but it wasn't like they could *help* it. Just like he couldn't help but finish the tray of lemon tarts when Dada made them, no matter what his other father said. It was, like, Fate. Delicious lemony Fate. The three of them were given a wide berth as they headed for the stairs, which tended to happen whenever Uncle Amadeus was around. He didn't have a lot of friends, which was why Masego had been glad to see him getting along with the lord earlier.

"Our little Masego was making friends when I found him," Aunt Sabah said.

"Was he?" his uncle said, eyebrow quirking.

"Oh yes," his aunt said, voice tight again. "With Lady Ubua. You know, Tasia's daughter."

His uncle's face blanked, which meant he was sad. Or angry. Or happy. Ugh, people were complicated. There should be a guide.

"Auntie's lying," Masego said. "I think I made them angry. Somehow. I don't know why they thought *I* was the rude one when she said she wanted to kill her own minion, but maybe she's just not that bright."

"It's not good to insult people, Masego," Amadeus said. "You should send a letter to Lady Ubua to apologize."

"Do I have to?" he whined.

"I'll help you write it, don't worry," his uncle said, a tremor going through his shoulders.

Aunt Sabah was grinning, which made people around them back away even further. Masego sighed, but figured he might as well. Father always said he was only supposed to hurt other people's feelings on purpose. They passed through the third floor and the boy tugged at his aunt's hand.

"There," he said, pointing ahead. "Papa's talking with people."

There was a cluster of at least a dozen highborn in a circle around his father, most of them women. Papa said something that had them laughing and drank from his cup, nibbling at cut of meat. Some of the ladies were looking a little red in the face, but people did that a lot around his fathers. Papa saw him from the corner of his eye and smiled, saying goodbye to his friends and sauntering up to them.

"Tikoloshe," Uncle Amadeus said, inclining his head.

"Amadeus," Papa smiled. "Always such a pleasure. And Sabah, dearest. A shame you did not bring your children."

"Bad enough I have to come, I'm not going to torture them with this kind of company," Aunt Sabah snorted.

"Do give my regards to your husband," Papa said.

His aunt laughed.

"'Loshe, I'm not going to help you flirt with him," she said. "Give it up."

"But he always gets so *flustered*," Masego's father said, smiling over the rim of his cup.

Uncle Amadeus' face was blank again. It was like that a lot, around Papa. Father said they didn't get along very well but when Masego had asked why he'd just said it was 'complicated'. The boy tugged at his father's tunic.

"There's going to be a formula reveal upstairs," he said. "I don't want to miss it."

His father's brow rose.

"Have you earned it?" he said. "How many people did you talk with tonight?"

"Ten," Masego said, having honestly no idea whether he was lying or not.

Papa studied him closely.

"Zego, are you lying to me?" he asked.

"It's not a lie if you don't get caught," Masego replied cheerfully.

The Empress had said so, once, so it must be true. Papa sighed.

"We will mingle after the demonstration, you and I," he announced. "And I will have no backtalk."

The boy grimaced but didn't argue. That way lay Callowan apples instead of pastries for dessert, which was basically torture and probably illegal. The adults talked while they made their way up to the garden, mostly about Aunt Sabah's children and how quick they were growing. She said they were going to be bureaucrats like their father, which sounded horrid but he supposed someone had to do it. The rooftop garden, he decided after they went up, was actually very nice. It wasn't just plants, there was also obsidian sculpted to look like flowers and trees and in little nooks he could see runes had been carved. Much of this, he realized, was actually illusions. He drifted away from the adults and elbowed aside a bush of large green leaves, kneeling at the foot of an obsidian tree and tracing the runes hidden in the roots with his fingers. The work was simplistic, he thought. The harmonics in the sound production could be significantly improved if they took out the array stabilizer and separated the core into two different workings. Yeah it'd be a little trickier to power but then you could have illusionary wind moving the leaves and also-

"Look at you," Father sighed. "They lose you for ten heartbeats and you get dirt all over your robes."

Masego looked up at his father, then down at his knees. Huh, it was true. He'd been kneeling in soil this whole time and pushing aside the dirt covering some runes had gotten some all over him.

"This is very unprofessional work," the boy said gravely. "They used a cascade pattern to keep the sorcery flowing, Father, it's like they're not even *trying*."

The dark-skinned man crouched at his side, the edge of his tunic brushing the soil.

"What is the Third Law of Artifice, Masego?" he asked.

"Sorcery anchored in the material will only work perfectly for the sorcerer who created it, because every caster leaves a different mark," the boy dutifully recited.

"And the corollary?"

"The more complicated anchored sorcery is, the more prone to failure it becomes over time," he said. "Simplicity is pow- oh. They made it shoddy on *purpose*, so that anybody could use it."

"The mage who first built the Stoneglass Garden was very talented," Father said. "But he knew his successors might not be as skilled, so he kept the system simple."

"That's stupid," Masego said bluntly. "If they're not good enough, they don't deserve to use it."

"This is a showpiece, Masego," his father said. "It's meant to be used as often as possible."

"All they're showing is that they're shit at spellcrafting," the boy muttered under his breath.

Father looked amused as he rose again, offering a hand to help him up.

"Come," he said. "Let's have a look at that formula. I'm told the demonstrator has improved significantly on an old Thalassinian spell."

Masego followed eagerly, excited again. There was a place in the middle of the garden where a large round platform of stone was left in the open, seats of pale wood set all around it. His uncle was already seated but Aunt Sabah wasn't, which made sense. She'd probably break the chair if she tried, she was *really* heavy. His fathers had him sit between them, Papa fussing with the tresses his aunt had messed up and shooting her a dark look. Silence washed over the garden when some Taghreb woman got onto the platform, bowing and talking a lot about how some High Lord was great and blah blah blah, honour and old blood and Gods when were they going to get to the magic already? Eventually she raised her hands and began tracing red runes in the air. Oh, so she used Miezán tracing. That was rare, it was a lot more rigid than the techniques developed under Dread Emperor Sorcerous. A triad of runes formed a triangle as she continued murmuring, then a thin needle of blue fire erupted from the centre of it. She guided it into shapes, but Masego's eyes narrowed as she watched. The initial quantity of fire had not changed: she was just thinning the intensity so it looked like there was more. It was inefficient. It was slow. It was *inaccurate*.

"No," he said, and rose to his feet.

There was a ripple of murmurs around but he didn't care, going onto the platform.

"You're doing it wrong," he insisted. "Look, look closer until you can have a **Glimpse** of what you should be doing."

His fingers danced across the air, using her lame Miezian tracing instead of proper High Imperial. He slowed when he made the initial runes, making sure she'd be able to see where he differed – adding a draw pattern to her initial burst, then followed along the same lines of her spell but actually making more blue fire because the working was still drawing on his sorcery instead of diluting the power like hers had. It fit, but already his mind was running through ways to improve the spell. Refine it, cut away at the impurities. Masego felt clarity descend on him like morning dew, fresh and limpid on his tongue. A sigh came from all the lords and ladies like they were a single person, and Father came up to steer him away from the platform. Some old man that was too light to be Soninke but too dark to be Taghreb came up to them, all smiles.

"My congratulations, Lord Warlock," he said. "A Name at his age is an achievement that will sound across the Empire."

Masego squinted at the stranger, then leaned close to his father.

"Father, who is that?" he whispered.

The only thing that broke the silence that followed was Uncle Amadeus' convulsive laughter.

Hierarchy

"Heed my warning princes and princesses of Procer: for every empire laid low by Evil, a hundred were wrecked by mere greed and stupidity."

– Extract from 'The Ruin of Empire, or, a Call to Reform of the Highest Assembly', by Princess Eliza of Salamans

They kept telling him he had servants now.

The League of Free Cities had no official seat even when a Hierarch ruled since Prokopia Lakene, first of that Name, had never established one. Her native Penthes was too far from the heart of the Free Cities, and she'd preferred playing off cities against each other to aligning with a single one. In the end Nicae was where the Conclave was called, with the Tyrant's armies still camped outside the recently-breached walls. Delegations from the cities arrived within days of each other, begun to travel long before the Siege of Nicae came to its bloody end. They all came to answer the call to elect the Hierarch of the Free Cities. Atalante, now freed of Helikean occupation for the price of its vote. Delos, whose Secretariat had sent a swarm of *askretis* to harass him with scrolls before the Conclave even confirmed his ascension. Magisters of Stygia from the ruling faction in their Magisterium, politely inquiring if he desired slaves to run his household affairs. The filthy Penthesians had sent five claimants to the title of Exarch of their wretched

city, all demanding his arbitrage. The Strategos of Nicae was dead, slain in battle while she fought the Helikeans, and until one could be appointed the Basileus of the city had seize power in full. The man had granted him the ancient palace of the Strategoi as a residence, as much a bribe to Anaxares as a slight to the office that was ancient rival to his own. For Helike the Tyrant stood alone, and the Republic had sent only one diplomat. The rest of the delegation were kanenas that followed him like a second shadow wherever he went.

He'd refused it. The palace, the servants – servants, as if any soul in Creation was suborned to anything but the Will Of The People – the soft bed and the draperies. Anaxares would have naught to do with this madness. He could not return to Bellerophon, to the Republic, and so he had tried to find work in the city. But the fishermen knelt and shook when he'd asked if hands were needed, and the fields outside the city went without tilling for they were still covered by soldiers. He knew nothing of smithing or shoemaking, for his entire life he had been nothing but a diplomat for his people and he had learned no trade. And so he had wandered into the ruined parts of the city, freshly sacked, and sat in the ashes with a begging bowl. For warmth he burnt trash, for unlike civilized Bellerophon where such things could only be done where an assembly of citizens from the quarter decided to allow in Nicae anyone could do so wherever they wished. He had a threadbare blanket ripped from a burnt house for his bed, and the sea for bathing water. It was a wretched living, but better than this talk of *palace*.

Anaxares had become a curiosity, to his distaste. Noblemen and functionaries came to his alley to drop coins in the bowl and attempt conversation, though he never replied. Some left gold, and that he tossed aside for other vagrants to have. Copper he took as alms, and silver if there were few enough, not that merchants accepted to take his coin. He had to leave it on their stalls over their protests, and some even tried to force it back into his hands. *Mighty Hierarch*, they wept. *Glorious One. All I have is yours*. When he first heard the words he threw up in an alley afterwards, shaken to his core. It was wrong. All wrong, and there was nothing he could do to fix it. There was no hope some delegation would come to its senses at the last moment and gave the single vote against that was needed to prevent his election. The Gods had elected him before men ever spoke their piece, cursing him with a Name regardless of his desires. The Tyrant had been their instrument in this, and for that Anaxares was glad he had seen nothing of him since the night where Nicae fell.

Kairos had ordered dragged at his feet a bloodied hunk of meat that he said was the White Knight, a hero anointed by the Heavens. Taken prisoner in the fight, he said, and now it was the

Hierarch who must decide his fate. The Tyrant was, the boy grinned, ever the head of the League's loyal servant.

"I give no orders," Anaxares had said.

"Silence is an order as well, old friend," the Tyrant laughed. "Your will be done."

The diplomat had washed his hands of the affair, walked away, and in the days that followed men and women of import had come in his alley to praise his mercy. Called his restraint in allowing the heroes to leave unmolested a beginning to mending the wounds of the League. He did not reply, but learned even his silences had weight now. Consequences. *There is no escaping this*, he thought. *Even when I do nothing, it is something*. He tried regardless. Decades under the watchful gaze of the kanenas had taught Anaxares to think along grooves already learned, to stay within the path decided upon by the People, but he went further. Eyes open, breathing steady, the diplomat tried to think of nothing at all. To abnegate life, for he was forbidden from taking his own. Hours became mere blinks of blank absence but Creation, Creation always dragged him back. Through hunger or heat or a myriad other little pulls that there was nothing he could do about. Never before had the diplomat so despised that he was but a sack of blood, bound together by bones and skin. He leaked and scraped like a peach, years of soft living having made him too tender by far.

The scrolls from the Secretariat kept coming, and though he was tempted to use them to feed the flames he refrained. That would be statement as well. He let them pile up at his side instead, pretending they did not exist and ignoring anyone telling him otherwise. He only understood his mistake too late. Anaxares had made himself a story, and stories were the beating heart of Names. He bit his tongue until it bled to avoid saying the word, but it sounded in his mind anyway. **Receive**. Another curse forced upon him, beyond his control. To his eyes and ears came whispers and images on the wind, and there was no avoiding them. There was no rhyme or reason to the aspect – it came and went as it wished, sometimes twice in an hour and sometimes absent for two days.

"You're sure he's just staying there?" a man in Penthesian robes said.

"Our men say so," some kneeling figure replied. "The Hierarch has gone mad."

"All Bellerophans are mad," the Penthesian said. "This is... something else."

The morning after the man he'd glimpsed came and left gold in the begging bowl, speaking of supporting him as Exarch to restore order to Penthes.

"The third request for war reparations had been delivered," a plain-faced woman said.

Her face was tattooed with lines of blue and black ink, marking her as appointed askretis of the twelfth rank.

"It was ignored?" a man asked.

His own tattoos were but two thin stripes, black and blue. Anaxares had never seen a member of the Secretariat so highly placed as to have only two lines, not even as an envoy.

"But not burned," the woman said.

"There must be some manner of proper method for submission we are unaware of," the man said. "Send a scroll requesting it."

The woman he'd seen stood before him before an hour had passed with a scroll in hand, and Anaxares was forced to admit the visions were true and not merely torment set upon him by the Gods. The next vision he received, there was no mystery as to who he saw. The Basileus of Nicae had visited him before, a young olive-skinned man with perfect teeth and braided black hair.

"It would be improper to appoint a Strategos before the Conclave has taken place," the Basileus told an assembly of nobles. "We must not slight the Hierarch by proceeding without his guidance."

"A Strategos would best represent us at the Conclave," an old man in armour bit back.

"The Bellerophan's demented, Your Excellency," a woman intervened soothingly, addressing the Basileus. "The Tyrant will be the power behind the throne."

"No one knows what the Tyrant wants," the Basileus said, looking wary. "He could have seized the Free Cities by force, if he so wished, yet he's withdrawn from all his conquests. I will not act recklessly before knowing his plan."

Bickering erupted after and Anaxares was reminded of the debates in the Republic, for a moment. It passed. These were richly dressed, in some closed room away from the people they claimed to rule for. There was not even an empty space left for the Gods Below to fill, should they care to vote – they never had in the history of Bellerophon, but the right had been granted and so it remained. The vision did not die, it merely shifted to another sight. The diplomat felt his fingers clench. Kairos Theodosian was seated alone in his tent, sipping at a goblet of water with a slice of lemon in it. His hand shook like a lead as he added some pale powder to the water from a satchel. A pair of gargoyles were fanning him with long feathered fans, though not very well. Their movements were too choppy. His red eye closed as he sighed

in pleasure, drinking deep, but when it opened it was looking straight at Anaxares.

"So which one is this?" the Tyrant grinned. "Bard likes the personal touch and scrying's not that subtle. Is it you, my glorious liege?"

The monster cackled.

"Already an aspect," he crowed. "I knew you'd take well to this. Belief, Hierarch. That's what makes Names, and it's not something you can fight."

The vision ended, and Anaxares was unsure whether it had ended naturally or been broken. He forced himself not to consider the ways of his 'aspect' more closely. It would have been leaning into the madness to embrace this Name even slightly. Once begun, there was no going back. In the end, two weeks passed before the Conclave was held. Every delegation sent messenger to inform him of it, the Basileus even coming to the alley. The young man looked at the filth and ashes with barely veiled distaste, repeating the hour and location thrice as Anaxares ignored him. It would be in the palace, he said one last time as he dropped coppers into the bowl.

The day came and Anaxares did not go.

It was near nightfall when they sought him out in the alley. Servants preceded them, a swarm carrying carpets and wooden seats so that no part of the representatives would have to be soiled. Only Bellerophon, he saw, did not bother. When the diplomat came, she sat on the ground. Anaxares spared her a glance, but did not recognize her. She was too young to have served with him. In that broken alley, a crowd of the most powerful men and women in the Free Cities assembled around him. Five Exarch claimants from Penthes. Two two-striped askretis of the Secretariat. The Basileus and the Tyrant, and from Atalante a pair of grim-faced preachers clutching beads representing the seven Heavenly Choirs the city claimed as patrons. From Stygia a familiar face watched him: Magister Zoe, the only other delegate spared when Helike first began the war. Mercantis had no representative. The Consortium had right to sit on League session, but this was not one like the others – the City of Bought and Sold had no say in the election of a Hierarch, as it was not member of the League. In the end, the Basileus was the first to speak. It was his right as host.

"A powerful message, my lord," the young man said. "Making us come to you."

Anaxares' fingers clenched.

"If I cut out my tongue," he bitterly said, "you would expect me to give verdict in ink. If I cut off my hands, you would demand I blink my agreement. Were I but a burnt husk, still answers would be asked of me."

He bared his teeth.

"Fine, then," he said. "I will speak. I am no *lord*, Nicaean. The very existence of that title is offensive to me. Do not ever call me such again."

The man's face flushed with anger, but he mastered himself. Young, the diplomat thought. He was too young and green to participate in such matters. Ambition had blinded him.

"No offence was meant," the Basileus said through gritted teeth. "I misspoke."

The moment of silence that followed was broken by the Bellerophan diplomat. Once upon a time, Anaxares thought, he might have been the one sitting there.

"The People have decreed the Republic is to put forward motion for the election of Anaxares the Diplomat as Hierarch of the Free Cities," she said.

"Would that I could rip that treason from their mouths," he replied harshly.

"Delos vote for," the askretis he'd seen in the vision said.

"Atalante votes for," one of the preachers said. "Mercy smile on us all."

"Penthes-" an Exarch claimant began, but he was interrupted.

"Votes for," another barrelled through.

"Nicae votes for," the Basileus flatly added.

"I bear mandate from the Magisterium to vote in favour," Magister Zoe said.

"Helike," the Tyrant smiled, red eye shining in triumph, "votes for."

"Damn you all," the Hierarch whispered hoarsely.

"All rise for the Hierarch," the Bellerophan diplomat said.

The sheer wrongness of watching one of his own people honour a Foreign Despot – for what else could he be called, now? – saw bile rise in his throat. The delegates rose one and all, bowing low. Kairos was the first to be seated again, allowing a gargoyle

to feed him grapes. It kept hitting his chin instead and chattering in anguish, but of anything it brought the boy enjoyment.

"The League of Free Cities now stands united again," the other two-striped askretis said, her voice solemn. "And so Delos now presents a matter for the Hierarch's arbitration."

None of the delegates showed surprise. This, he thought, had been arranged before they ever came here.

"First Prince Hasenbach has been corresponding with the Secretariat," she said. "And most other cities as well. She seeks truce, and alliance if she may. This is no longer a matter that can be settled by the cities."

Years as a diplomat had taught Anaxares the ways of the League, and so he knew she spoke truth. In the absence of a Hierarch, the only way for every city-state to be bound to a treaty was if it was agreed upon by member majority vote. Otherwise every city chose for itself. The passed motion to make truce with the Principate had been what first drove the Tyrant to begin his war, and now that the war was over the point of contention was resurfacing. Worse, after the election of a Hierarch precedent dictated they alone held authority to make such treaties for the League as a whole. The head of the League held no more sway than allowed within the walls of the Free Cities, but they spoke for the League as a whole – Prokopia Lakene, his only predecessor, was said to have believed this to be the only way the Free Cities would stand equal to powers like the Principate and the Thalassocracy. Her opponents had whispered she sought to make another Procer out of the Free Cities, and her work had collapsed after her death and the round of wars that followed.

"Procer's itching for a crusade," Magister Zoe drawled. "'tis nothing unexpected. Let them cut their teeth on the Empire. Whoever wins, we can extract concessions from the loser."

"A Stygian preaching opportunism," the Basileus bit out. "Speaking of expectations. Some of us had the fucking Calamities raining hellfire on our cities but a month ago. Where is your talk of cranes now, Magister? Where are my people's retribution and redress?"

"You had the Sovereign of Red Skies wrecking your city," Zoe said slowly, her tone implying she was addressing an imbecile. "And now that you survived this, you want to give him reason to *come back*? Boy, appoint a Strategos and let someone with godsdamned sense do the speaking for Nicae."

"Language, my friends," the Tyrant chided cheerfully. "In front of our Hierarch, no less. For shame."

Half-hearted apologies were muttered at Anaxares.

"Praes is a den of darkness and iniquity," one of the Atalantian preachers said. "Let us walk in the light of the Heavens, and join the First Prince's righteous enterprise."

"This and a slave's pisspot for your Heavens, priestling," Magister Zoe replied tartly, her following gesture highly obscene.

Kairos frowned at the sight, but did not repeat himself.

"There are still three Calamities left," the male askretis said. "This is not a war to be undertaken lightly. What do we stand to gain, by fighting monsters in their own lair? Let us make truce with Hasenbach and wash our hands of it."

"Truce doesn't mean the end of trade," a Penthesian claimant said. "The Empire will be hungry for grain and steel. Procer will need truce before it feels safe to invade, but we need not grant them more. The longer the war lasts, the greater our profits."

"And if Procer wins?" another claimant sneered. "Will Hasenbach think fondly of us, then? Best we side with her now, and avoid trouble after the dust settles."

"It is the belief of the People that nothing is owed," the Bellerophan diplomat said. "The wars in the north are of no import to Mighty Bellerophon, First and Greatest of the Free Cities. Involvement is unnecessary."

"Spoken as a delegate whose city shares no river with the Praesi," the female askretis said. "Isolation is a valid choice only for those who are isolated."

"There'll be a flood of refugees going south if Procer manages to take the Vales," a Penthesian predicted. "The Wastelanders will dig in and flip open the grimoires, but the Callowans? We've all heard the rumours. Open rebellion followed by the fae, and they've got some girl villain stirring the pot. The place is a wreck, and it'll bleed people down the Hwaerte and the Wasiliti on every boat they can find."

"Mercantis will take in many," Magister Zoe said.

"The Consortium will welcome the rich and send the desperate on their way," the Basileus replied flatly. "Save for those they force into slavery."

"The Red Flower Vales are not so easily breached," the male askretis said. "And the Legions of Terror are no mere footmen. None of us believed Callow would fall, twenty yeas ago, yet the Dread Empress surprised us. She may yet again."

"The Vales are only one flank, Delosi," a preacher said. "If Ashur lands an expeditionary force on the coast of Praes, the Empire may well collapse from the inside. As is ever the lot of Evil."

"We do not know for a fact the Thalassocracy's siding with the Principate," the Basileus warned. "Ashurans are a treacherous people by nature, it springs from the Baalite blood."

"Magon Hadast pulled the rug out from under Levant to her benefit last year," a Penthesian snorted. "The man's made his choice, and the rest of the citizenship tiers will follow his word like heavenly decree."

"Blasphemy," an Atalantian hissed.

"Kiss angel feet all you like, priest, it makes you no holier," the Penthesian sneered.

Anaxares let the squabbling wash over him and studied the envoys, tightening the blanket around his shoulders. The diplomat from Bellerophon had not spoken again, and watching her he had no trouble guessing wise. The Republic had not granted her right of negotiation, only to present its position – her hands were tied. Two of the cities, he understood, were truly married to their stances. Stygia pushed for absence of treaty, because it desired to raid the losing side for slaves. It had no real allies in this, but Magister Zoe was unmoved. The Magisterium must have given her strict orders. Atalante, though fresh out of Helikean occupation, was intent on joining the shaping crusade. Why? The city was broken: he had seen it with his own eyes. Was it truly faith guiding the preachers, or the need for plunder to fill the coffers for the rebuilding? It may be both. Atalantians were an emotional breed, and now that they were forbidden revenge on Helike they might be seeking to even the scales with the Tyrant's allies. Foolishness. They should be seeing to the harvest, not talking of war. The Hierarch watched them, and saw the lines. The words he needed to speak to sway them to war or peace, to alliance or enmity. They were on the tip of his tongue. He bit down on it until it bled.

There was no greater sin than to rob the free of their freedom, and he would have no part in it.

"Ladies, gentlemen," Kairos Theodosian said. "Lend me your ears."

The silence that followed was absolute. There'd been many among those present who'd mocked the Tyrant, once, but that had been before the war. In the span of a year the Tyrant of Helike had sacked two cities of the League, forced a third to surrender and forced the election of his chosen candidate as Hierarch. For all that – horrifying as it was – Anaxares had been named head of the

League, the true power within it was a crippled boy with shaking hands and too broad a smile. When he spoke now, men listened.

"All this talk of the crusade whispers that we are but accessories to it," the boy said mildly. "Witnesses and servants, not truly of import. Without even knowing it, you have surrendered the fate of Calernia to Cordelia Hasenbach and Dread Empress Malicia."

His good eye twitched, a spasm he did not control.

"Does this not shame you?" he smiled. "To have learned the lesson of our irrelevance so deeply you no longer question it?"

"No one wants to follow you into war with Procer, Theodosian," the Basileus said.

Brave young man, Anaxares thought, but not a very clever one.

"Leo, Leo, Leo," the Tyrant sighed. "Is silver truly all that is needed for you to become Hasenbach's pet?"

"How dare-"

"The days of Tyrant Theodosius are past," Magister Zoe interrupted, cutting off the Nicaean. "No one disputes your... achievements, my lord. But Procer is no longer a loose confederation of warring princes. Should we strike at one principality, we bring the full weight of the Principate down on our heads. No amount of lightning will turn back that tide."

"Then your objection is one of capacity," Kairos said. "Not intent."

"The Magisterium has no love for the Principate," she snorted. "Neither does anyone here with any sense."

"Procer is the bulwark against Evil to the north," the Basileus barked.

"The Lycaonese have served such a purpose with distinction," the female askretis said. "This does not erase the many bloody deeds of the Arlesites. Many a war has the League fought against the principalities of the south."

"The League of Free Cities," the Tyrant said smilingly, "is pathetic. We have held on to our borders by the skin of our teeth, but what great power has not humbled us? Praes occupied half our cities for two decades under the second Maleficent. Ashur strangles our trade whenever it pleases and Procer, oh *Procer* – have you all forgotten why this League exists at all? How close we came to being under the rule of princes."

"Tyrants ever speak of war," an Atalantian said. "Yet always defeat finds them. How many of our people need die for your ambitions?"

"Look at the world, my friends," Kairos chuckled. "Look at the lay of the land. The Empire stands besieged, Procer prepares to bleed breaching it. Ashur is led by an old man who would send the Thalassocracy's fleets to war very, very far away."

The boy's eye shone red, red like blood, and his grin was a villain's grin.

"When has such an opportunity ever come to us?" he asked. "Never before, and it may never come again. Do you want to be remembered as the men and women who had a chance to bring greatness to their people but flinched away out of mere *fear*?"

His bad hand was steady now, curled like claws.

"Are you not tired, my friends," he asked, "of kneeling to these greater nations? Are you content with forever remaining pressed between titans, hoping none turns and rolls over us?"

He bared his teeth.

"I want the Samite Gulf," he said. "I want Tenerife and Salamans and Valencis to be cities freed, brought into our league. I want Praesi and Procerans to cease warring over who rules our own streets."

He raised his hand.

"And so I call for war," he hissed. "A good old war, my friends, the kind that carves up a continent forever. I want sieges and desperate charges, I want hosts breaking and smoke darkening the sky. I want the rivers to run red and palaces to burn. Give me the sound of horns and shields shattering, the sound of arrows falling like a rain of steel. Give want victories so great they will tremble to hear of us from Smyrna to Rhenia."

The red was deepening, Anaxares thought, to unearthly crimson. The boy's words hung in the air like a haze, silvery as a fae's glamour.

"And those victories I promise you, true as my Name," the Tyrant grinned. "There is a fate just within our reach, if we dare to grasp it."

Kairos turned to him then, and inclined his head in a gesture of respect that was anything but.

"Your arbitrage, Hierarch," he said.

There was no greater sin, Anaxares of Bellerophon thought, than to rob the free of their freedom.

"I give no orders," he said. "You may all do as you wish."

The man looked in Kairos Theodosian's red eye, and wondered if he was imagining the faint sound of laughter ringing in his years.

Prosecution I

"He who casts judgement will ever be judged in turn."

– Ashuran saying

Hanno had borne eighteen inked notches on his arm since the age of twelve, yet never truly grown used to the privilege. The seeker who'd come to his native district for the yearly tests had done more than simply choose the tier of his citizenship: the man had set the path of his life until he died. Hanno's own father had been of sturdy frame even young and possessed no aptitude for scholarly matters, and so had kept the tier of his own parents: twenty, with a note by his name indicating preferred assignment to the mines. The boy himself had been found to bear different talents. He had remembered the seven colours of the marbles he was shown for a fleeting moment and their respective numbers too, then proved to have some understanding of numbers and letters. Eighteenth Tier, the seeker decreed. The lowest rank of civil servants in the Thalassocracy, yet a world apart from the back-breaking daily labour that was his father's lot. His mother had no ink on her arm at all. She had not been born in Ashur, and would never be a citizen. Even two decades after she had made her home in Arwad, she still needed to give way to any citizen on the street and show an official scroll proving her marriage to Father when yearly taxes were collected. She would be forcefully evicted to the foreigner's district if she failed to do so even once, whether she had an Ashuran son or not.

It sat ill with the boy. Had his father been a ship's captain of the Tenth or even sat on any of the lower councils, Zoya of Thalassina would have been safeguarded even in widowhood. But promotions up the tiers were rare, near the bottom, and that Father's name was to the side of a Soninke exile's in the registers made it certainty he would never sit on any council at all. A Tenerifan would have been forgiven, perhaps even a Nicaean. But Mother had been born in the Tower's shade, and even centuries after the Great Conqueror had been slain the memory of her atrocities was laid at the feet of all her people. It was a story often told in the alehouses still, though less was spoken of Ashur's surrender to the villain and more of the coming of the Hegemony's fleet to liberate its daughter-holdings. Hanno had no fondness for the Baalites himself, and avoided those that came to Arwad as much as he could. They were arrogant, and never lower than the Seventh: to offer even accidental slight to men such as

these could have grave consequences, even an offhand word enough to have him demoted out of both tier and title of court scribe for the Outer Tribunal. It would be a hard blow to the family if it happened. The notches on his arm allowed him access to the markets deeper in the city where the better fare was sold, and earned the coin to afford it.

He had been raised on black bread but enjoyed breaking his fast with the grey now, and even white bread with butter once a month. Going back to miner's food would not be pleasant for any of them. Hanno swallowed the last of his boiled egg and touched his knuckled to the table to thank the Gods for the meal under his mother's tolerant gaze. He'd risen an hour before dawn so he would be able to visit the temple, but even so Father had been gone when he woke. His labour in the mine began before dawn and ended past sundown.

"You should make the proper gestures as well," he told his mother. "It would help with... it would help."

He'd answered the jeers about his mother being some kind of foreign seductress with fists and and feets, when he'd been younger, but now that he was fourteen he could no longer risk it. If he was brought to the attention of the guards as a troublemaker, he might lose his position at the Outer Tribunal.

"You have your faith," Zoya of Thalassina smiled. "I have mine."

"The Hellgods are no true gods," Hanno muttered. "Just great and mighty devils."

"This land knows little of devils, Hanno," she said, brushing back an errant lock of his hair. "I came to these shores because of this. But do not speak such ignorant words. Below listens. Below remembers, and pays its debts in full."

His lips thinned but he did not argue, for he needed to hurry. His parents did not often speak of religion, for his father rarely set foot in a temple save on festival nights and his mother kept her faith quiet. She a;sp kept a small tile in a dark corner of the house, and every time the moon was full shed blood and salt on it. For luck and long life, she said. The tile was always pristine after the moon began waning, though he'd never seen his mother clean it. Father often teased it was a waste of time, for her Gods were pricks one and all. *But how much worse would they be, without tribute?* Mother always replied. Hanno kissed his mother's cheek and took his satchel from the floor, waving her goodbye and picking up the pace so he'd have enough time for full prayer at the temple. Barcalid District was near the edge of the city, not far from the docks, and so its temple was smaller and poorer than those of the wealthier districts. Hanno loved it nonetheless, for it was said to be one of the first temples the Baalites had raised on these shores when they

settled them. He set down his satchel on the steps outside, sure not even a tierless thief would fool enough to attempt theft on hallowed grounds, and knelt before the gateless arch of old wood. Three heartbeats he spent kneeling, then rose and advanced with quiet footsteps into the sanctum.

There was no light within save for the sun's coming down through the openings in the ceiling, and a pair of braziers in the back. That part of the temple Hanno shied from looking at, for on a thin carpet set over an iron grid the Speaker would be seated. The heavy scent of the incense and redwood being burned in the thuribles hanging from the grid in the pit below drowned out every other smell, even this close to the street. Head bowed, Hanno walked the full path around the seven pillars in silence. The masks paced on the jutting wood were not set with precious metals and jewels as they were in richer temples. No, in his district they were clay and driftwood, seashells and baked mud. There was an eighth pillar in the back he did not walk before, the one whose masks were sculpted straight into the wood. The faces of the Gods Below, never to be taken off and worn by the Speaker as the faces of the Gods Above could be. *Neither denied nor embrace*, the old saying went. After walking the path Hanno returned to the second pillar, as these days he often did. It was most fitting for a court scribe to pray before the Face of the True or the Face of the Just, but it was the Face of the Kind he had always preferred. Even among the poor masks of this place it was unadorned, a simple visage of wood hanging from a nail. No inscription or carving.

Hanno extended three fingers and kissed the tip before touching them to the mask. Of all the faces of the Gods, he loved this one best. It asked nothing of the faithful but to offer kindness without expectation, to allow a sliver the light granted to mankind to be offered back to Creation. *Gods Above, You Who Are Kind, let me cause no pain*, Hanno prayed. *Let my hand be gentle and my tongue guileless. Let the only life given me be a gift unto others.* A whisper of bare feet and rough spun robe kissing the ground behind him had the boy opening his eyes. The Speaker stood behind him, wearing their birth face. It would have been impious to attempt to see if the priest had been born man or woman: a Speaker renounced it all when they became so. Gender, name, past. They spoke for none but the Gods, and their words were that of the very Heavens when they wore a Face.

"Do you seek guidance, child?" the Speaker said.

Hanno bowed his head deeper.

"Not this morn, Speaker," he replied softly.

He was humbled by the offer, though also scared. It was rare for one of the priests to offer guidance unasked. It was said that if a Speaker spoke untruth while wearing a Face their flesh would be

burnt by Heavens' own hand, a mark of shame for all to see. The faithful only rarely asked a Face to be worn and guidance provided, for the words of a Speaker often brought to light truths unpleasant. The Gods Above were father and mother both, and their love for their children was ever dispensed with firm hand. The Speaker's eyes lingered on him.

"You have a light in you, child," they said. "Do not let it go out."

And then they were gone, as quietly as they had come. Hanno bowed again before the Face of the Kind but left without walking a farewell path. He would be expected in court soon enough and his usual shortcut through the foreigner district was sealed now that it was under quarantine. Some trader from the Free Cities had brought the welting pox along with their goods, and with so many priests out of the city to prepare the Festival of Ropes in the countryside the sickness was spreading too quickly to be stamped out by ordained healing as sicknesses usually were. The boy had to bare his arm to the guards at the Halan District's gate to be allowed entrance, though they knew him well. Law was law, in Arwad. Lower tiers had no place treading these grounds unless summoned by the Outer Tribunal. The courthouse where Hanno had been apprenticed was one of the lesser even among the Outer Tribunal, but he did not mind. It was a rare day where it saw no case brought for adjudication, and for such a small court it had a large scrollhouse.

The many laws of Ashur made up most of the collection, including a full set of Madrubal's famous treatises the *Ten Scales*, but many foreign laws were set to parchment as well. The Outer Tribunal often settled disputes with foreign traders having occurred within the city, so the laws of southern principalities like Tenerife and Valencis were kept by the side of the more-often used records of Nicaean and Delosi legalities. Hanno enjoyed the quiet days most, as he'd obtained permission to read the scrolls when no duties were left to him. Today would not be one of those, though. Baring his arm a second time before the constable, Hanno greeted the old man with a smile.

"Good morning, Veno," he said. "Looks like a warm day, doesn't it?"

The constable eyed his arm for the notches, as he had every morning the boy came to the courthouse since his testing. That the ink was there every time changed nothing, for duty was duty. All must serve as ordained, for Ashur to shine.

"That it does," the constable agreed. "The sun will do my bones some good. You should hurry inside, Hanno. The foreigners came early."

The dark-skinned boy winced. That did not bode well for the very same Stygians who'd sought adjudication. He didn't know what tribunes had been drawn to oversee the trial, but he knew quite a few who'd take offence to what could be perceived as foreign impatience. Not his trouble, though. He thanked Veno for the advice and passed through the scrollhouse with only swift greeting to all the senior scribes and archivists, avoiding conversation. As one of the youngest in the courthouse and more than decent with a quill, he tended to be given assignment as scrivener when trials took place. The duty was usually long, tedious and unforgiving of mistakes, which made it quite unpopular with his fellows. Failing to properly transcribe the spoken words of a tribune was a good way to get on their bad side if they noticed it, and that usually got you assigned every chore in sight for a few weeks. His suspicions were proved correct: when he set down his satchel and made the cursory bows before the only official judicial scribe of the courthouse, he was given an affectionate pat on the head along with a greeting. That usually meant Scribe Zenon was about to send him off after a chore.

"Scrivener?" Hanno sighed.

Scribe Zenon as, a duly recognized judicial scribe, was a citizen of the Fourteenth tier. He was quite friendly, however, and often reminded the lesser citizens under him that if he'd sought to be surrounded with formality all day he would have remained serving in the High Tribunal.

"Clever boy," Zenon said fondly. "It's not as bad as you think. The serving tribunes are Lagon and Discar, but the absent is Yzebel."

Serving tribunes were the adjudicators of any trial brought to the Outer Tribunal, always in a pair. Should they prove to disagree on the verdict, a third tribune known as the 'absent' would tip the scale one way or another. Serving tribunes usually paid little attention to the scrivener, but the absent one was seated right behind them. If said tribune was prone to reading over shoulders, the duty could become quite nerve-wracking. Tribune Yzebel was nearly seventy, though, and known for both terrible eyesight and motherly fondness for younger scribes. In this he had truly been fortunate, and Hanno discretely made the three fingers over his heart in thanks to the Face of the Kind.

"Go on," Zenon told him, smilingly. "I'll let even let you use the courthouse quills this once, as reparation for this delightful morning duty."

Hanno's face split in a smile. It was a little thing, but an accolade nonetheless. Scriveners were usually made to use their own ink and quills, and strictly disciplined should those be damaged in any way. The ability to take care of your own satchel was considered a mark that one was qualified for further

advancement within the tier. The courthouse quills were of much better quality, though, and the inks preserved in ritual boxes said to have been made in Praes. Which, while a land of lawless savages, was said to be ruled by powerful mages. Both would be a pleasure to work with. Hanno bowed low in thanks, and headed to the courthouse proper. Trials took place in an open courtyard, when weather permitted, with twin raised seats reserved for the serving tribunes before which those in need of adjudication would stand. A lesser seat was to the side for the absent tribune, and before it a carpet and wooden writing desk. Hanno bowed to the tribunes in the proper order then sat at the desk as Tribune Yzebel waved him down affably.

The case was not an overly complicated one. The supplicants, a pair of Stygian traders, were not disputing against Ashurans but asking compensation of the Thalassocracy itself. Such a demand would usually be under the authority of the High Tribunal to settle, but as the loss had been incurred within Arwad itself it had been passed off to the Outer after being put before a committee. The Stygians had come to Arwad with a hold full of slaves, to obtain tea from across the Tyrian Sea before making shore in Nicae with their goods and returning home to great wealth. They had been forced to remain in the city because of the quarantine, and though priests had prevented them from catching the welting pox they had lost most their slaves to it. As they had lost goods because of an Ashuran decree, they sought reparations of equal worth from the Thalassocracy. Upon being asked by Tribune Lagon the provenance of their slaves, they refused to answer the question. Some eastern shore of the Free Cities, Hanno guessed. Villagers from some coastal nowhere taken in a raid, though the Stygians could not admit to this before the Tribunal without the entire case being dismissed. The serving tribunes remained even-handed, though they must have suspected the same. Ashur did not reimburse traders for natural calamities and their effects on trade, but it was law for compensation to be offered for the inconvenience of forced quarantine if it resulted in provable loss. The Stygians insisted they be offered back to their harbour fees as well, if not the worth of their slaves, but the demand had no basis in Ashuran law and so they were sent off fuming. Hanno penned the last of the official record and set the quill down, finding Tribune Yzebel leaning close.

"It looks done quite properly," she smiled, wrinkles thickening.

"I would not fail the Outer Tribunal," Hanno replied gravely.

She mussed his hair, which he rather disliked but did not object to.

"Old Zenon tells me you've been spending time in the scrollhouse," she said.

"I enjoy reading the scrolls," the boy honestly replied.

"Good," Yzebel said. "Some of our archivists are getting long in the tooth, young Hanno. If you keep discharging your duties so admirably there may be a place among them for you when one retires."

The boy's eyes widened, and he bowed low. Archivists were of the Eighteenth tier as well, but even within that tier there were differences in rank. To be custodian of written works was to stand above a mere scribe, and it was not unheard of for long-serving archivists to rise up a tier. They were also much appreciated among committees for their learning, and those who had seat on such things often wielded the highest authority within their own tier – if not slightly higher. He was still beaming from the tribune's words when he left the courthouse to present his transcription, though the joy was replaced by surprise when he found Scribe Zenon waiting for him at the outskirts of the scrollhouse.

"Hanno," the man grimaced.

"Sir?" the boy said. "I was bringing you the transcripts, if that is your need."

"No," the older man said, "but hand me those anyway. Your father, he works in the mines to the south?"

Hanno's head dipped hesitantly.

"I'm so sorry, child," the scribe said quietly. "There's been a collapse. Go back home, your district seat should have the Lists of the Lost soon. He may have been lucky."

His father, he learned within the hour, had not been lucky.

—

Sorrows never came alone. There was no body to bury, and that was the blow that truly unmade his mother. The mine shaft that collapsed over his father's head had been old and already picked clean, and so the committee of Thirteenth tier citizens that oversaw the aftermath of the disaster decided it would be amongst those that would not be cleared out. It would be, they said, a net monetary loss for the Thalassocracy. Hanno knew his family was not wealthy enough that they would have been able to afford a driftwood funeral for Father, that his body would have never been set on a raft for the eastern tide to take back to the faraway home of all Ashurans, but that it would not even be buried in consecrated grounds wounded him. The Gods Above would know their own, and the soul of a good man would be brought at their side, but for profane earth to be the tomb of his own father was a shameful thing. The priests laid blessing upon the whole mine and

spoke the names of the lost, but that was as much to allow work to resume as to honour the dead. Worse, there was but a month left before the yearly taxes were to be collected. Without Father, his mother would be expelled from Barcalid District and sent into quarantined grounds. It could not be borne.

Hanno went with every dawn as a suppliant to the district seat to ask the ruling committee to grant an exemption, but he was never even allowed to state his case before them. His fellows in the Outer Tribunal shared his sorrow, but none had the influence or inclination to intervene. The boy swallowed his fear and begged every tribune that would listen to speak in his mother's favour, but increasingly cold refusals were his only answer. There was no more talk of his becoming archivist after that. As the day grew nearer and his fear mounted, Mother grew calmer. Grief had numbed her at first, but that distance eventually turned into something else. She offered comfort he was not willing to receive, and began to speak of the city of her birth. Faraway Thalassina, on the coast of the Wasteland. She told him of the seashell walls that surrounded it, of the great port where traders from all of Calernia and beyond came to call. Of the beautiful and terrible highborn, of their strange sorceries and exquisite clothes. Of the Empress they said was the most beautiful woman in the world. He asked her, then, if she wanted to go home. She told him his father had been home, and that it was now beyond her reach. The morning after, he found her gone when he rose.

The tile in the dark corner of the house was gone as well.

It was instinct that had him find her but it came too late. The same committee that had left his father to mass grave was attending the districts where pensions were due to widows and widowers, and on that day that had come to Barcalid.

"Gods of my ancestors, grant me due," Zoya of Thalassina snarled, throwing the tile at their feet. "Blood for blood, life for life. Let every breath be a torment, every night a terror, every pleasure turn to insipid ash. Let them have no rest or peace until my love lies in the grave he earned. *I curse you to this with my last breath.*"

Even as guards hurried to wrestle her down, she took a knife and opened her own throat. As her blood stained the tiles the light of day dimmed, and with the curse still on her lips his mother died. The Gods Below listened. The Gods Below remembered, and in that moment paid their debt in full. He knew this to be true when the first man of the committee began to *scream*.

—

The weeks that followed were lived only by the ghost of him. Even as one cursed citizen after another found their salvation beyond

the ability of hurriedly summoned priests and took their lives to flee the agony, whispers spread through the district. *Witch*, children called his mother. *The Witch of Barcalid, don't say her name or you'll be cursed too. Wasteland spawn*, old women muttered, shaking their heads disapprovingly. *They always go bad, didn't I tell you?* The district's ruling committee summoned him to stand before them after a full fortnight under house arrest. As the last member of the family, he was informed a decision had been reached to strike every mention of Zhoya of Thalassina from Ashuran records and registers. Any trace of her presence, every act she had ever made, was now never to be mentioned again. He would not be given the body. It had been burned at sea without his permission, far enough no ash would ever touch the shores of the Thalassocracy. Hanno sat in a sunny courtyard before twelve Ashurans with grave faces and was told his own fate would now be debated. Though he had committed no crime, the depth of his involvement in the murders had yet to be established. Complicity warranted punishment under the law, should he be charged with such.

"In light of your exemplary service under the Outer Tribunal, a chance has been granted you to denounce the act of the woman who gave birth to you," a man told him.

A name had been given, but Hanno could not recall it. Looking up at the bright sky, the boy remained silent.

"You would have sent her," he finally said, "in a quarantined district."

"As was only lawful," a grey-haired woman said flatly.

Hanno considered this.

"It was lawful," he eventually conceded. "Was it *just*?"

"Justice is the exercise of Ashuran law," the same woman said. "Nothing more or less."

He studied her face for some time.

"My father's body," he said. "Will it be buried properly?"

The men and women of the ruling committee looked uncomfortable, some looking away.

"That is not for us to decide," a man said. "Another committee will be assembled to reassess the matter."

They would do it, he understood in that moment. Because the citizens who would be charged with that debate would be wary of the curse finding them too. Because Mother had made them *afraid*.

"This matter does not fall within the business of this hearing," the grey-haired woman said. "Further departures from such will be

punished. Hanno of Barcalid District, citizen of the Eighteenth Tier, will you or will you not denounce the actions of the woman that gave birth to you?"

They would not even say her name, he thought. Even that had been stricken.

"Zhoya," he said. "Zhoya of Thalassina. That was her name."

"You have broken censure," a man said coldly. "This will be taken into consideration."

"No," Hanno said calmly. "I will not denounce her. It is not for the likes of you to stand in her judgement."

They demoted him to tierlessness, though they refrained from naming him a criminal. The ink notches on his arm were removed by a mage, his skin left smooth and unmarred. Though still a citizen, he was now stripped of all rights – even that of keeping the home he had been raised in. Hanno pondered this. It was Ashuran law, and once he would not have questioned it. Now he wondered, for he had been forced to see the laws of his people were not always what he believed they should be. His eyes had been opened, and all the old truths were as smoke in the wind. If a law was not just, could it truly be a law? It shook him, because he could not trust himself to see the truth. He knew his own anger, his grief. And even without it, he would be as flawed as the men who had made the laws he now decried in his heart. It had been correct to refuse the committee, he decided. They were as blind as he. Homeless and umoored, he found his feet taking him to temple once more. Three heartbeats he knelt before the gateless arch, and entered hallowed grounds. This time, he did not walk the path. Forward he went, and knelt again at the feet of the priest shrouded in incense.

"Speaker," he said. "I seek guidance."

They looked at him through the mist.

"What face would you have me bear, child?" they asked.

"I ask," Hanno said, "for the Face of the Just."

Prosecution II

"Men often speak of justice as the middle way, the compromise, but that is the guise of lesser evils. Justice is to uphold that which is right, and there is no place for compromise in this."

– King Jehan the Wise of Callow

In olden days, when Creation was yet young, a mighty king in the east was entreated for judgement. A great lady had harshly struck

a servant, who in his wroth at the blow wounded her with a blade. The king stood in his hall and listened to the words of both until day passed and night fled, yet found no answer to give. For the king sought to be just and justice is a rare and fleeting thing. In his despair, the king called upon the three famed judges of his realm and sought their advice.

The servant must die, said the first judge, himself a great lord. It was law that no servant may strike a master, and laws must be obeyed lest the realm itself fall into disarray and men wound men with impunity. There is just order to the world, the first judge said, and this order must be upheld even when that which is protected stands undeserving.

The servant must be spared, the second judge said, once a servant herself. Though the wounding of the lady was a sin, so was striking of the servant. In committing sin of her own, the lady diminished the sin of the other. To be just is to shield the weak from the strong, said the second judge, and the balance of sin must be weighed by power.

Forgiveness must be given, the third judge said, an old and kind man. Though order was needed and the helpless owed shielding, to take and ruin life for the passing madness of a moment was to do disservice to all. Let the lady and the servant kiss cheeks and thread hands, the third judge said, for in mercy that justice can be found.

The mighty king heard the words of his judges, yet he was not satisfied. The answer of the first judge he found wanting, for it trusted in the laws of men and men are flawed. The answer of the second judge he found wanting, for it placed circumstance above sin. The answer of the third judge he found wanting, for it was not judgement at all but mere amnesty. The king slept not for months as he pondered, and thus was born the Riddle of Fault.

You who sought the Face of the Just, you will give answer.

Hanno had not known sleep in a fortnight where the words did not sound in his mind again and again. He caught himself whispering them under his breath after he woke, every single one singed into his mind as if a brand had been applied. Every time his eyes closed he saw the Face of the Just again, that slate of coal with harsh threefold eyes. Six times six wings he had glimpsed through them, and scales of copper where men would have borne skin. He had knelt at the feet of the Face of the Just but been granted no guidance, only more questions. That, and rusted coin so hard-bitten the metal it had been minted from could no longer be discerned. The Speaker had taken shaking breath, after offering the riddle, and with trembling hands blessed him.

"Seek the silent tide," they had said. "The coin will afford passage."

The boy slept in the streets, huddling in an alley in the outer districts with the other tierless beggars until the city guard roused them with spear butts at dawn and forced them to disperse. He was hungry and tired and aching, but he had been told to seek the silent tide and so he did. He dragged himself to the docks, though without inked notches on his arm he could only enter those open to foreigners. There awaited ships and men who used strange tongues, Arlesites speaking the singing Tolesian dialects and merchants from the Free Cities who gabbled in tradertalk among each other. None looked at him twice, after seeing his bare arm. They had learned the worths and measures of Ashur, the meaning of being stripped of duty and due. Tierless were as ghosts within a land of the living, ungainly to look upon and best driven to ruins and empty hovels. For hours Hanno wandered aimlessly, sandals beating against stone as he sought something he did not know how to seek. His mind felt dull and dim, as if he had been robbed of the fire that once warmed it and shade had crept in its stead.

As twilight came, he found the tide. There was nothing to see, and that was what he saw. Though foreigners swarmed the harbour like locusts, filling every nook and cranny, there was a bubble of stillness. As if kept separate by some unseen wall, men passed it by without ever looking at it. Hanno himself tread by it thrice before his eyes found purchase, and almost forgot as soon as they had. There was an old man, blind and crooked, who sat at the edge of the pier with a wooden fishing rod in his hands. At his side was a slender ship of creaking wood and woven reeds, left unmoved by the tides. A sail hung from a pole, unraised. Hanno sat by the man's side in silence and waited. The fishing rod never found bite, and the man's only movement was the slow rise and fall of his breathing.

"They are not kind," the stranger said, voice like grinding stones.

The boy considered this.

"I did not ask for kindness," Hanno finally said.

"Whatever squabble brought you here, they will not care," the old man said. "They do not give, child. They take and take and take until there is nothing left but smooth stone."

"I have nothing," Hanno said, and it was oddly liberating to speak the truth out loud. "I am nothing."

"Five I have sent, in my day," the stranger said. "None returned. Ashur is not loved by them, child. There is too much rot in the flesh, and the Seraphim despises that sin most of all."

"Then I will not return," the boy said. "What does it matter?"

"Might be that you do," the old man darkly said. "My days run out. There is always need for a boatman."

"You went," Hanno said, and it was not a question.

"Aye," the old man said, turning to offer a leering toothless grin. "I looked away, boy. If I can offer you advice, it is to fail utterly or not at all. The middle ground is the worst of it."

A shiver went down his spine.

"I will tread to the end of the path," Hanno murmured. "No matter what lays at the end."

"Then offer me your obol," the old man said. "I gave you fair warning."

The rusted coin was in his hand before he reached for it, and he pressed it into the old man's palm. Face a mask of grief, the stranger flicked his fingers and sent it spinning into the air. It fell into the sea without a sound or a ripple. Hanno slowly rose to his feet, making for the boat, but the old man clutched his arm feverishly and drew him close. His breath was foul.

"There is no riddle," the stranger whispered. "Listen to me, boy, *there is no riddle.*"

The boatman released his arm, form shivering. He let out a cackle.

"What will you punish me with now, you old snakes?" he called out to the sky. "You have already done your worst. The only way left is down, and you are not so merciful."

The boat was not moored. Hanno fled to it, distressed by the ugly rictus on the old man's face. He knew not how to navigate, but raised the sail and pushed off. Where must he go, now? There was no path to follow on water. Wind caught the sail and the boat moved, dragging him away from Arwad and onto the sprawling sea. Was it sorcery or miracle that moved it? It did not matter. There was, he noticed then with quiet amusement, no tiller or rudder at the back. He had not been meant to find the way on his own. Days and nights passed, and though never did the ship end its journey neither did it come in sight of any shore. Hunger tore at his belly, ate away at his limbs. Thirst burned deep in his throat without even a drop of rain to quench it. Had it truly been been a fortnight? He could no longer tell, lying prone at the bottom of the boat and drifting in and out of consciousness. Hanno could barely even move, now, but death did not come. His skin darkened

with the sun, grew rough like leather, and only when his ribs came to ache did he drift into his final sleep.

Hanno stood outside of himself, watching his silhouette brawling with another child's. He remembered this, dimly. This was Barcalid District and he was nine years old. So was the other boy, the son of a digger in some inland mines. The whole family was born to the Twentieth Tier and would die to it – and even within that tier, they neared the bottom. The boy's parents toiled in one of the mines where foreign prisoners were made to work through their sentences before release. Death came often and cheaply there, his father had once told him. *Wasteland witch*, the boy had called Hanno's mother, looking for the approval of other children all the while. They cheered when Hanno struck him across the mouth. They tangled over stone, struggling wildly until Hanno kicked him in the stomach hard enough to make him puke. The others changed their colours with the turning tide, calling the boy *weak-bellied* and abandoning him to shiver alone in the street. The younger Hanno joined them, but the older one remained. He watched the boy wipe away angry tears and spit out the last of the vomit before dragging himself to his feet. He returned home, where no one awaited. Later that night his mother returned, and offered him the third of a black bread loaf before crawling into her bed to sleep. The father came back long after dark, smelling of liquor.

Don't ever lose a fight again, the father said, and struck him across the mouth just as the younger Hanno had. The boy gritted his teeth and eventually fell asleep under threadbare blankets. The skies shifted and passed as Hanno watched the boy grow into a man, wed and have children of his own. Watched him strike others as he had been struck, violence begetting violence. Nothing lost and nothing learned. A life of fists without a single offered hand.

Hanno stood, and knew himself watched. There was no invitation, yet the expectation rang like a bell – and behind it awaited judgement. He would not, he suspected, be offered right to defend his actions twice. As the life of the boy began again, with young Hanno's first blow rippling across his cheek, the older boy frowned. He had not sought that fight. Insult had been given. Neither was he at fault for the father's sins, or the life delivered unto all of them. Where, then, did the fault lie? Ashur had birthed and raised them, but Ashur was but an assembly of Ashurans. Were they all complicit, then? Simply for being born? He could not find the fault in this, or the justice. Just people, acting as people always had and always would.

"Through ignorance, I contributed to evil," Hanno Tierless said. "I ask not for absolution."

What is the answer to the Riddle of Fault?

"I don't know," the boy whispered.

The voice had come from nowhere, and did not ask again. The world shifted once more, and Hanno stood a ghost again. He watched himself seated before twelve Ashurans in a sunny courtyard as a grey-haired woman asked him to denounce his mother without ever speaking her name. He watched six wings of copper erupt from his back, visible to none, and his gaze grow heavy with power. He watched himself render judgement upon the would-be judges, and find them wanting. *I charge you*, he heard himself say, *with cruelty and indifference. I charge you with choosing law over right, with embracing blindness.* As his eyes shone, they could not weather the Light that came with it. Blindness embraced them in return. He left that courtyard a righteous man, and brought that righteousness to all of Ashur.

"No," Hanno said. "That, too, is evil."

The boy he watched bore power, but he was not just. To mete out retribution upon those he found at fault was no different than what he had despised, in the end. It was only the judgement of power. The rule of strength, bereft of equity. There was no sin in law or the defiance of it, but to clothe retribution in the guise of justice was a thing of evil. What justice could there be, in the blind exertion of violence? To do such a thing would make him unworthy of the very strength being used.

What is the answer to the Riddle of Fault?

"Not this," the boy whispered.

The world changed once more. This time, no vision or fantasy was put before his eyes. Only a collection of moments, all his own. Wrath, first. The wanton boiling of blood, the taste of victory in his mouth as his strength triumphed over that of others. Lust and envy came hand in hand, covetous eyes laid on women wed but still beautiful. Resentment in knowing they would never be his. The urgent press of lips against lips, the knowledge that the girl loved him but not him her discarded for the heat in his veins. Deeply buried hatred, for those who stood higher than him. Who ate better, who could decide their own lives. Who could see Creation with eyes instead of scrolls. Disgust and fear at tierless beggars. The ugly press of reassurance when violence was dealt to make them leave his sight. Pride at his skill with a quill, at his cleverness and memory. The unadmitted contempt for those less blessed. Kindness offered only for his own pleasure, for the thrill of knowing himself good. Taking bread from his father's portion, telling himself he had earned it more. Moment after moment came before his eyes, and Hanno Tierless knew himself to be a ghastly soul.

The urge was there to look away, to end the parade of shame. The burn of the admissions did not grow easier with the number, every

one fresh and acute. What utter arrogance, to have thought it possible for him to be worthy of any power at all. Hanno looked at the plain writ of his life, the parts of it he had taught himself to ignore brought to light, and found nothing of worth. Not a single selfless speck of dust. All his life he had worshipped at the temple, kneeling beneath the Faces, but all he had ever offered was sordid mockery. Faith picked and chosen, made hollow by his very nature. It did not matter, that there were worse men and women. Not here before the Seraphim. He was being made to answer for his own life, cut clean of all ties and deceptions. Hanno would have asked for forgiveness, but there was nothing to forgive but imperfection and imperfection would always be his lot.

What is the answer to the Riddle of Fault?

Hanno was clever, well-learned and discerning. He knew the words of the riddle, the three judgements and the indecision of the king. One judge offered order. Another offered excuse. The last offered mercy. Reason whispered to him that there was fairness to be found. A path between, where justice could be glimpsed. Let both the lady and the servant answer for their sins, the matter separate. Balance between the three judgements, wisdom found between the extremes. But it was the wisdom of a mortal, and Hanno had been taught the weakness of it.

"The fault lies with the king," Hanno Tierless said. "For believing himself capable of justice."

They showed him, then. What it was they saw.

The endless shifting tapestry that was all the decisions that were made and could be. The impossible lay of action and consequence, of motive and result. It was too much. It was too much for him to see, to understand. The boy screamed, felt all that he was fray as he glimpsed a whole he had never been meant to glimpse. The sum of all that was and would be, the culmination of endless paths. Hanno felt feathered wings envelop him, cold arms of metal embrace him closely. He was blind, now, and had never felt more blessed.

"Do not be afraid, child," a voice whispered into his ear. "You are now beyond fear."

"We give you nothing."

"We take everything."

"You will win no honours."

"You will know no love."

"You will find no peace."

"Hanno of Arwad, we claim you."

"Truth and sum and whole."

"We charge you with service unending."

"We burden you with unknowable mandate."

"You will weep without solace."

"You will die a thousand deaths."

"But in the end, you will rise."

We anoint you our White Knight.

Instrument of Judgement, Doom of the Wicked.

The Seraphim embraced him, and it felt like home. Like clarity and scales ripped from his eyes, never to grow again.

—

The boy woke to a thumb and a forefinger hoisting him by the scruff of the neck. Dark eyes large as boulders studied him curiously. The giant let out a breath like a gale.

"Man-child," it said. "You reek of the Seraphim, yet you live. Curious. Have you come to deliver sentence onto the Gigantes?"

In his palm lay a silver coin. One side bore laurels, the other crossed swords. He knew this to be true without laying eyes upon it. The boy considered the question he had been asked.

"I," Hanno slowly said, "do not judge."

Court I

"Ruling is to promise a man a boat and his brother the river while owning neither."

— Kind Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

"This Liessen business is fucking unacceptable, Brandon," the woman said, fist pounding the table.

Grandmaster Brandon Talbot of the Order of Broken Bells, arguably the second most influential officer in the Army of Callow after the Marshal herself, hid his displeasure with the ease of long practice. Though he understood Lady Julianne's outrage, and indeed shared it himself, theatrics such as these would get them absolutely nowhere.

"This reeks of Kendall's doing," Samuel Farron said. "She's been gathering the malcontents under her banner, and now she'll get an entire duchy to hand out piecemeal."

The man was the oldest among them, and though his grandfather had been only a baron in the days before the Conquest he was perhaps the most influential of the Regals – who boasted men and women of greater lines, not the least Brandon himself. What his line had lost in title, they had reclaimed in wealth and alliances. This did nothing to make him any more likeable, no matter how useful he might be: Samuel Farron had learned the unfortunate lesson that he was always right, and grew indignant whenever Creation had the gall to disagree with that state of affairs.

"Chewing off Brandon's ear gets us nowhere, my friends," Valerie Hadley calmly intervened. "You have all read the proposed arrangements. I suspect this comes from higher up than the Governess-General."

The unspoken shadow of the queen brought silence, however short, and Brandon nodded his thanks at the woman who had just spoken. House Hadley had been middling retainers to the Marquesses of Vale once, little more than jumped up landed knights, but of all the Regals it was Valerie Hadley that Brandon most enjoyed working with. The calm competence married to stark humility was refreshing, considering some of the egos he must corral. Her seat in this council of the greatest of the Regals came more because she was the only person of note from Vale to have joined them than because of her skills, unfortunately. Something Farron was not above reminding her of whenever they disagreed, which was frequently.

"The queen's not used to thinking in terms of land," Samuel replied flatly. "She was a damned penniless orphan for most her life. This is Anne Kendall trying to fuck us, and anyone who's not a fool can see it."

"Clearly I am a fool, then," Hadley said. "For the fact that land grants would in large part go to retiring legionaries does not strike as a ploy of the Queen's Men."

"Greenskin and Praesi owning Callowan land, this is what the court had simmering," Lady Julianne sharply said. "I held my tongue when the queen settled goblins in Marchford, Brandon, because it is her demesne and you raised no objection. But this? This goes too far."

I held my tongue because objecting would have served no purpose but irritating Her Majesty, Brandon thought. And because the Snake Eater Tribe brought us both badly needed coin and a workforce capable of making siege weapons without relying on the Tower's charity. Neither thought had it made it more palatable that lands by House Talbot for over five hundred years were now

infested with skulking vermin, but the Grandmaster had learned early that the queen's tolerance for protest only stretched so far.

"Lodging protest through the court is not possible," Brandon sighed.

None of them were supposed to have even seen the proposal they were now discussing, though a concerned citizen had written a copy from memory and sent it to them. Someone would be sent to the gallows before the day was done, if Catherine Foundling believed her own court was leaking documents under seal.

"We can express our displeasure through intermediaries," Samuel Farron said. "Nothing touching us directly."

"If we do we'll be swimming in Jacks before the next bell," Lady Julianne grunted. "I don't know about you, but I'm tired of finding my good bottles open and my papers slightly askew."

Brandon grimaced. He had already expressed to Lady Thief his misgivings about these little reminders to the Regals that they were being watched, but the Named had only been amused. *It's good for fine folk such as you to be reminded about the consequences of wickedness*, she'd said. His favourite hunting knife had disappeared the same night, though Lord Deadhand had later returned it with a seemingly sincere apology.

"We can't do *nothing*, Julianne," Farron barked. "I will not watch silently as Callow is handed away piece by piece to foreigners and toadies."

"He's right," Valerie Hadley reluctantly said. "Her Majesty's open favour already emboldens the Queen's Men. If we stay our hand on so large a matter, we will suffer defections."

"Favoured or not, the queen has been... pragmatic on the issue of Baroness Kendall's supporters," Brandon reminded them. "One of ours leads the city guard in Summerholm, and we hold the docks in Southpool. My attempts to broach the matter of the governorship in Denier have not been rebuffed, either. I question the wisdom of surrendering a gain so close to our hand for what promises to be a losing battle."

"So she hasn't outright handed the keys to the kingdom to some southern collaborator," Lady Julianne snorted. "Must we must praise Her Majesty for this? She's still having her Taghreb dig into our coffers."

Considering none but Brandon at this table was not a landowner of more than comfortable means, the Bastard Lord's property taxes had gotten stuck in the throat of most Regals. That the baronies in the north had been spared the sword by virtue of still being

true nobles had only added insult to injury. It'd been bad enough there had been talk of arranging the Taghreb's disappearance, but Brandon had been uncompromising in squashing such scheming. Her Majesty was viciously protective of any she considered friends, and striking at a man who'd followed her since her early days as the Squire was a recipe for every Regal in Callow swinging from a noose. And that was assuming the mood did not take her to make another example, as she had of the sorcerers sworn to the Diabolist. Brandon had ridden down the Road of Woe, before they took the corpses down. He still shivered at the memory of bloodied corpses propped up as milestones as far as the eye could see. None of the other Regals had been on the Arcadian Campaign, or Second Liesse. They did not know the kind of monstrosity the queen was willing to unleash when she believed herself threatened.

"She's shutting us out of the army too," Samuel Farron growled. "I'm getting tired of having fine officers refused by a fucking greenskin."

"We *cannot* try to force that," Hadley said. "You should know this by now, Samuel. I'm not happy nearly all the senior officers are former Legion either, but she won the throne with the Fifteenth at her back. If we try to wedge ourselves into that, we chance Her Majesty seeing it as an attack."

"A certain level of intrigue will be tolerated, that much has been made clear," Brandon said. "But let it always remain polite and lawful. Let us not forget the ending of that... ill-considered attempt to bribe the Lord Treasurer."

The queen's mercy in that matter had almost been cruel, he thought. The fines had ruined the eldersmen financially and the mark of the throne's wrath had ensured they would never hold a position of influence ever again. Considering the rising influence of officials in Laure, having been kicked off the boat just as the tide began to lift it must have stung even worse than the gallows.

"Petty Laure officials," Farron scoffed. "Mudfoots with no sophistication. That game is played with favours, not coin. We just need to find out what the orc is truly after and she'll bargain like everyone else."

Brandon Talbot had campaigned with Marshal Juniper twice now, and he suspected on most days what the Hellhound desired most was Samuel Farron's guts on her plate. It was not worth the expense of his influence to try to end an initiative that might yield some success, however. Down the line it could be suggested to the queen that reverses in other matters might be reconciled by some... strategic appointments in the Army of Callow. Having candidates already on the record would only strengthen their position. Already Brandon's freedom to do as he saw fit with the Broken

Bells had been expanded greatly, so it was not a matter without precedent.

"We're certain that Her Majesty raising a new Duke of Liesse is out of question?" Hadley pressed. "I know inquiries were made, but we never petitioned the court."

The queen had to be talked out of striking down the titles to the northern baronies, Brandon thought. No duchy will be raised in her lifetime, my friend. That one is a lost cause.

"Given the involvement of Lord Adjutant's new offices with the refugees, I suspect it would come too close to curtailing the crown's power to be even seriously considered," Talbot admitted. "And while I share your disdain for this notion of turning the entire Duchy of Liesse into freeholds, we must admit that the region had been well taken in hand."

Grain, tents and clothes had begun flowing south within hours of the queen's coronation. The Deadhand was nothing if not efficient, that much must be conceded. That about nine in ten refugees had so far survived winter in the face of cold and starvation was nearly miraculous. Even if that miracle had been woven from Praesi gold.

"They screwed Old Darlington out of making a killing with his wool, too," Lady Julianne smiled coldly. "Always a pleasure to see we are not lowest in the queen's esteem."

"There is only so much distinction between bottom-feeders," Valerie Hadley said. "We have shown restraint, Brandon, but our gains remain limited. I am not fool enough to talk rebellion, but something must be done."

There was a thread of frustration in the woman's voice, and the Grandmaster sympathized. He felt it too. Yet he also knew that what they considered stewardship of Callow earned by right and blood was seen by Her Majesty as infuriating arrogance. Now that peace had returned, however fleeting, the queen had ceased putting the heads of all opposition on pikes. Farron and Lady Julianne saw this as their ruler softening, but Brandon knew better. The Queen of Callow was trying to outgrow the savage teachings of her eastern mentors and return Callow to what it should be, but all she did she did with an eye on the looming war with Procer. Disagreement would be tolerated, but anything construed as obstructionism would see the blades come out.

"We are only worth appeasing so long as we are more useful than troublesome, my friends," Brandon quietly said. "We should all remember that, before raising our voices too loud. Catherine Foundling is not a Fairfax. She will not balk at sending the Jacks to abduct us in the middle of the night, if she deems it necessary."

"Then she shouldn't be-" Farron began, but Hadley smacked her palm against the table.

"Let us not drift too far from the subject at hand," the woman said. "Brandon, by your continuing calm I take it you have a notion as to how we should proceed?"

"Tolerance continues so long as we remain within set bounds," Brandon said. "Let us work within these bounds, then. Anne Kendall is no friend of ours, but there is one that stands above even the Queen's Council. One who takes no sides."

The others watched him with considering eyes.

"I will talk," Brandon Talbot said, "with Hakram Deadhand."

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There were too few hours in a day. Hakram had, on one of those rare instances where Archer managed to drag Masego away from supervising the building of the Observatory, asked Hierophant if it was feasible to work in Arcadia to get around the span of time. He'd said yes, then added so many qualifiers to that agreement the conversation became unintelligible. Unfortunate. Instead he'd gotten to explore the limits of how little sleep he could live on before becoming sloppy. The orc poured himself a cup of aragh and shuffled through the piles on parchment on his oaken desk.

"Drinking on the job, Hakram?" Ratface teased. "How irresponsible of you."

The orc growled, not that it scared the fucking Taghreb. The former quartermaster had not become any less of a pest now that some Callowan honorary address had been tacked on to his name.

"Can't drink with Catherine anymore," he admitted. "I'm trying to wean her off."

Amusement slid off the Lord Treasurer's face.

"I know she's traded wine for liquor since Liesse, but I was under the impression Named couldn't get drunk unless they wanted to," the man said.

"Her body's all fucked," Hakram said. "The warlock's get wants to write a treatise about it, which should tell you everything. I think it takes the edge off Winter, though. And there's not much else that accomplishes that."

"We never talked about what went down in the city," Ratface slowly said. "But what bits I dug up hint it was... bad."

"Malicia crossed a line," Hakram said. "And the Black Knight broke her trust. The second of those cut a lot deeper."

"There is an old story, I believe, about scorpions and trust," Ratface murmured.

More than one, as it happened. The one they told in Callow was charmingly moral, a warning about men's nature and how they followed it even at their own expense. The Praesi tale was not a warning but a lesson: the scorpion swam to the shore, after stinging the frog. *Never assume weakness, never trust anyone with your back.* Like most Praesi stories it idolized cleverness and treachery without addressing the inherent stupidity of killing someone willing to help you.

"We've all had mentors," Hakram said. "Smart doesn't come into it."

"Let us hope Procer ties up that loose end, then," the Taghreb said. "We cannot afford to be stung twice."

The orc drank from the cup, savouring the muted burn down his throat, and rolled his shoulders.

"All right, spit it out," Adjutant said. "What are you after, Lord Treasurer?"

The olive-skinned man cast a dubious glance at the sheaths of parchment and opened scrolls that covered nearly every surface of Hakram's solar.

"If I asked you for a report, would you even be able to find it?" he snorted.

"Finding's a specialty of mine," the orc replied with a fanged grin. "Now spare me the dancing around."

The Taghreb sighed.

"This cannot be put to ink," he said.

Hakram's hairless brows rose. The Jacks were being forced to keep much off parchment out of fear of Imperial infiltration – particularly Vivienne's people since there was a decent choice the Eyes *didn't* know who those were, unlike most their other spies – but Ratface did not often bring anything off the record.

"Your guildsmen or the friends in low places?" Adjutant asked.

Ratface shook his head.

"I had drinks with Pickler, a few nights ago," he said.

The orc's chin lowered, a hint of fangs revealed. With the Fifteenth being folded into the Army of Callow he hadn't seen much of the old crew lately, since the Hellhound was running them ragged. Pickler had it worst than most, trying to form a halfway decent expanded sapper corps out of Marchford goblins who'd never set foot at the College. That had seen her journeying back and forth to the settlement the Snake Eater Tribe had founded in Marchford, out of the tunnels the giant devil snake Catherine killed had dug. The rent the tribe offered had been badly needed income and goblin manpower was a balm now that the Empress had ended their recruiting rights in Praes – and therefore both the Steppes and the Eyries. They were a complication as well, though. Even on their best behaviour goblins tended to piss off humans, which was the last thing Callow needed at the moment, but there had also been... larger implications. The tribe currently had no proper Matron. It was ruled by a pack of matron-attendants until that could be settled, but if there was anyone out there who made Praesi looking like amateur dabblers at backstabbing it was female goblins. There was a reason for the lack of Matron, as he understood it.

Pickler's mother, the Matron of the High Ridge Tribe, intended for her daughter to retire from the Legions and lead the only goblin tribe living outside of the Grey Eyries.

Hakram suspected the amount of murder and backroom dealing that must have gone on for other Matrons to accept that was horrifying. Pickler had an edge over any candidate, admittedly, because of her close working relationship to the highest reaches of Callow. No other goblin would get half as much sufferance from Catherine. On the other hand, the Senior Sapper had run away to the War College exactly to be spared this kind of position. What Adjutant knew of goblin politics was sparse, mostly cobbled together from bitter comments Robber made when in his cups, but he'd gathered that Pickler was essentially the goblin equivalent of a High Lady's daughter. If she'd stayed with High Ridge she'd be a matron-attendant by now, murdering her fellows in preparation for succeeding her mother. Apparently Matron Wither had decided to secure a tribe for her eldest daughter no matter how far she ran away. You could run from honours, but you couldn't run from blood. All orcs knew that, true as they knew their own breath.

"If they try to force her retirement just before a crusade there's going to be blood," Hakram grimly said.

"If that were the angle, I'd be less worried," Ratface murmured. "She was dragged into a meeting with the matron-attendants, where she was interrogated about Cat's intentions for the Empire if she ends up on top when the dust settles."

Hakram's breath caught. Did they know about the Accords? They'd just begun drafting them, it shouldn't be possible. If the Matrons knew then the Dread Empress might, and if Malicia learned about those...

"Some people might consider that treason," the orc said.

The Taghreb met his eyes squarely.

"I know her too, Hakram," he said. "She doesn't forgive things like Liesse. The Empress didn't make that doomsday weapon, but it doesn't take a High Lord to figure out she made a grab for it. There's a reason the Black Knight hasn't set foot in Praes since the battle."

There was much more to that than his old friend knew, but that was not knowledge to idly spread around.

"They're smelling weakness," the orc gravelled. "With the Carrion Lord estranged and Callow garrisoning borders, they think the Empress is on the way out."

"No deal was offered," Ratface cautioned. "People who underestimate Her Dread Majesty tend to turn up dead and the Matrons didn't last this long by being reckless. They're opportunists at heart."

"She hates them, Ratface," Hakram bluntly said. "She's fine with goblins, but the Matrons everything she despises about highborn incarnate. And I agree with her, frankly. They're snakes, and they'll bite us just as surely as they will the Empress if it gets them what they want."

"I am Taghreb," Ratface smiled coldly. "Bastard, but still Taghreb. We know the Matrons better than any of you, the dangers of getting into bed with them. But we don't *have* to get into bed with them. We just have to promise to stay out of it."

The orc grit his teeth.

"There's already too many moving parts in the Tenth Crusade," he finally said. "A goblin rebellion on top of it is tossing a sharper into the fire."

"Think on it," Ratface said. "Talk to her. But we can't dally for too long, if we're making overtures."

The Taghreb rose to his feet.

"A sharper's only ever trouble if you're the one it's tossed at," the Lord Treasurer said quietly.

Hakram grimaced. Ratface had never taken sapper courses, so he might not know that one sharper in twenty blew before ever making it into Imperial supply stores.

Adjutant did, and he thought the metaphor more apt for it.

Court II

"Salvation is ever an act of violence, be it within or without."
– Dread Emperor Reprobate the First

The Woe, Brandon Talbot had learned, had some very peculiar oddities. Queen Catherine's disdain for luxuries was infamous – and had made her popular in some quarters, when it'd spread she'd sold off some of the more ostentatious Praesi inheritances to invest the sum in the army – but each of her companions has their... unusual habits. Lady Thief, he knew, could shift from displaying the manners of a noble of the old blood to those of a mocking thug in a heartbeat. And the least said about her tendency to steal for sport the better. The Archer was, by all reports, a dissolute hard-drinking brute. Yet she could also quote the classics in three languages, and seemed to be the only person in the Kingdom of Callow that could hold a conversation with the Hierophant on the subject of sorcery. Brandon would have preferred a life where he'd never heard the Lay of Lothian's Passing strategically quoted to be perverted into a ribald comment about the skills of fair-haired men in bed, but that'd she'd done it in flawless High Miezan was rather impressive. The language was, after all, long dead. The Lord Hierophant was perhaps the least unsettling, in that he reminded Brandon of the stories once told of the Wizards of the West. Absent-minded, prone to discourse few others could understand and blatantly disinterested in anything even remotely connected to statecraft.

He also held conversations while looking at his interlocutors through the back of his head with magical eyes, which was a little less traditional.

Hakram of the Howling Wolves, the Lord Adjutant, had embraced a different sort of oddity. The even-tempered orc was, by objective study, the second most powerful individual in Callow. The queen had made it clear that when he spoke it was with her full authority, and though he lacked an official title besides his Name he had a seat on sessions of the Queen's Council whenever he so wished. He stood higher in the court's hierarchy than either the Governess-General or the Lord Treasurer, and if so inclined could have claimed the traditional luxurious office and rooms of either. Instead, the greenskin passed his hours in the cramped and crooked room that had once belonged to King Robert's personal scribe. Brandon had never once seen the man that the Army of Callow openly considered the heir-apparent to Catherine Foundling either turn his back to the door or allow his axe to be further

than hand's reach. The Grandmaster's allies had been incensed, when they'd first learned that the army would back the orc as heir if anything happened to the Her Majesty. He was, after all, a *greenskin*. And it would have been a lie to say that the Regals had not been attempting to position themselves for ascension should the luck of the battlefield turn against the queen.

Only the fact that the Deadhead had shown no interest in rule and that Anne Kendall was almost as unpalatable an alternative had prevented the situation from escalating. That, and Brandon's harsh and continued reminders that any attempt to remove the orc from power would be met by brutal and unrelenting violence from Her Majesty. The Grandmaster dismissed the thoughts from his mind, schooling his face into serene pleasantness as he bowed to the orc. Hakram Deadhand, after all, outranked him in both military and courtly ranks.

"Grandmaster Talbot," the orc gravelled, shuffling parchments aside. "Take a seat."

The bow had been returned with a simple nod, one that matched the requirements of etiquette under the assumption that the man was of equal standing to sitting members of the Queen's Council. Humility at work, though with an unspoken edge. Brandon claimed the chair across the parchment-covered desk, eyes flicking to the movement as the Adjutant used a paring knife to work on the tip of a quill. The orc had unusual finesse, for one with such large fingers.

"I thank you for the audience, Lord Adjutant," Brandon replied. "I know your duties stretch your hours."

The greenskin's maw flicked open, revealing a swift flash of fangs in what could have either been threat or amusement. The Callowan had not made study enough of orcs to be able to tell, thought perhaps he should. For all that the Regals saw him as the authority on the newborn Foundling dynasty and its greats, that was more a reflection on the little exposure they'd had to the key members of the regime than of his own deep understanding.

"No rest for the wicked," the Adjutant said. "Well. Should we pretend I don't know why you requested this talk, or will we skip the usual song and dance?"

The tone was mild, as if the orc did not care either way. There was no impatience there, Brandon grasped. The Deadhand was perfectly willing to... *indulge* in the demands of their rank, as if they were some children's game. The unspoken dismissal of centuries of established etiquette rankled, but did not surprise. None of the most powerful people in Callow these days had risen to rank by observing the proper niceties. Smoothing away the wrinkle of irritation, Brandon forced a smile.

"I am not opposed to bluntness on occasion," the Callowan aristocrat said. "Campaign has taught me the virtues of it even in civil matters."

The reminder that Brandon Talbot had fought unflinchingly for the queen on fields foreign and domestic both would not be askew, here. Now that the blades had been temporarily sheathed, his Regals were too often treated as the enemy for his tastes. The orc's hairless brows twitched, the thick ridges of skin in movement implying mirth. As expected, the unspoken part had not been lost on him.

"Thief's people will be combing through the court for whoever talked," the Adjutant said. "Catherine was understandably furious that something under seal was leaked."

Brandon kept his face calm, though worry spiked. The Jacks were skilful and thorough: it was only a matter of time until the culprit was found. After that, the only thing awaiting was the noose.

"There would be no need for any of this," the Grandmaster said, "if any of my people were kept apprised of large developments."

"I reminded her as much," the orc bluntly admitted. "But you've also managed to cast into doubt every single appointment your people achieved. The Governess-General was pushing for a general dismissal, and it took me the better part of an hour to get that off the table."

Under the desk, the dark-haired man's fist clenched. He'd warned them, he had. That the moment the Regals became the enemy in Her Majesty's eyes, she would strike thoroughly and without mercy. Having Kendall whispering in her ear would only make her less forgiving. *And we can't even claim that such a measure would result in civil war*, he thought. The Regals were influential, that much was undeniable, but they did not enjoy the kind of support that the Queen's Men or the queen herself did with the lower and merchant classes. Their power was one of tradition and wealth. At court, it made them strong. But no city would rise in rebellion if the Regals were purged from civil appointments, and the threat of gold only held when the other side did not have the men to *take* that gold if they wanted to.

"Your moderating influence is appreciated," the aristocrat stiffly said, inclining his head.

"Don't take it as a sign of approval," the orc said. "Your clique is beginning to overstep. If removing it didn't mean handing over the run of the kingdom to the Queen's Men, I would have let you hang from your own noose."

Brutal but honest. That was the reputation Lord Deadhand had, in matters such as these. While more open to compromise than the rest of the queen's most trusted, the orc's willingness to be diplomatic only went so far. Yet he remained aloof from the partisan politics of the court, and as a voice of reason that made him priceless – as did the fact that he had the queen's ear more than anyone else. Brandon calmed his breathing. He was not insulted by the bluntness, because that bluntness had not been meant an insult: the Adjutant was merely clarifying his position so no confusion would ensue in the following conversation. The Callowan, swallowing years of lessons on the subject of proper behaviour, decided to follow suit. The Woe, it should not be forgot, had been mostly paupers and vagrants before their rise to power. Their appreciation for directness had deep roots, and could be used.

"It is appreciated regardless," Brandon said. "To be frank, my people have been restless for some time. This planned partition of Liesse is only the droplet threatening to tip the cup. I hope I will not offend by pointing out that the Regals have been thrown scraps from the high table, and then expected to remain docile and quiet for that privilege."

The greenskin's dark eyes studied him silently. As always, the Callowan made an effort not to glance at the hand of bones that was resting atop the desk.

"Then I'll be frank as well," the orc replied, fangs bared for longer than previously before they were hidden behind the lips. "Your people have not proven loyal or useful enough to get the kind of appointments you're pushing for."

"And Kendall's are?" Brandon flatly asked.

"No," the Adjutant said. "We're well aware they look to the Governess-General for instructions. But they also know that they'll be tossed out the moment your Regals gain influence, and it's keeping them in line. As a hanging sword, your people have proved usable. But the accompanying agitation is proving more trouble than that lever is worth, and I will not defend unreliable actors."

Which, the aristocrat thought, you now suspect we might be considering we're willing to have our people pass information under seal. It was infuriating, because if any of the Regals were on the Queen's Council there would have been no such ploy. As long as Talbot's allies knew they had a voice at the table, they would have been worried about losing accumulated influence by stepping out of line. But they did not have a seat, so more desperate means had to be used to remain relevant. *And using those means disqualifies us in Her Majesty's eyes from having a seat in the first place.* It was a vicious circle, without any obvious solution but allowing what influence the Regals had to

wane and hope the queen looked well upon them for it. Certain loss for uncertain gain. It was a solution that, if Brandon was to be honest with himself, he would not even attempt to put forward at a council. Not least because he did not truly believe in it himself.

"If we are removed," the Grandmaster said, "the balance of power in the kingdom collapses."

"Yes," the orc agreed. "And so Catherine told me to report this conversation directly to her, instead of having Hierophant dig through the brains of your allies for a name. This is the part, Brandon Talbot, where you make your case for the continued usefulness of the Regals."

The man's blood ran cold. He'd sought this meeting to arrange for compromise and concessions, but he'd been reading the lay of the land wrong. His people were not the only ones running out of patience. The orc's broad and ugly face was serene, but the warning ran clear. If he reported to the queen that there was nothing salvageable about the situation, it would not be dismissals that followed. It would be the Jacks taking people in the middle of the night never to be seen again. And Governess-General Anne Kendall would be the sole truly Callowan voice to decide the kingdom's legacy. The roof of his mouth was dry.

"You would lose the Order of Broken Bells," Brandon said.

The orc frowned.

"I presume this is not the threat it sounds like," he said.

The aristocrat shook his head.

"Knights," he said, "do not grow on trees. They are raised through rigorous training. Through learned traditions. And by allowing the existence of families that can afford to equip and support one of their own with the accoutrements of knighthood. Guildsmen and eldersmen have neither the knowledge nor the capacity to replace us in this regard."

"A mark in your favour," the Adjutant said. "In the short term. It is not sufficient to make the unruliness of your people a pill sweet enough to swallow."

It took a conscious effort not to react visibly. *Careful now, Brandon. This is the knife's edge.* The Grandmaster knew, without needing to question it, that the Regals were necessary to the kingdom. He simply needed to make the queen see it as he did, and there lay the thorn. *Marriage alliances?* No, that was a dead end. To be worth wedding in the eyes of foreigners his fellows would need titles the queen refused to bestow. And marriage alliances both within Callow and into other nations would form power blocs

Her Majesty would frown upon. *Military officers?* It had already been made clear that the Army of Callow was barred to nobility save if it rose through the ranks after enrolling in the lowest ranks – an unacceptable condition to most his allies, who would not tolerate their kin taking orders from Praesi and peasants. *Ties to the House of Light?* This one, he suspected, might even be a mark against them. The queen's dealings with the priests would be much eased if she was the only possible interlocutor. He was going about this the wrong way, Brandon realized. Why were his people *needed*, from the perspective of Her Majesty? From three heartbeats he met the calm stare of the Deadhand, until the answer finally came.

"Ability," he said.

"Talented officials we can't trust or use are more danger than boon," the orc stated flatly.

"Lord Adjutant," Brandon said. "In all of Callow, how many guildsmen and eldersmen do you believe are actually literate? Or familiar with more than basic arithmetic?"

"The upper ranks of every major city and holding," the Deadhand said.

"Let us be generous and assume half these individuals can be spared from their current responsibilities for court and civil appointments," the Grandmaster said. "That is a very shallow pool."

The orc's eyes narrowed in thought.

"You believe the Queen's Men are running out of competent candidates," he gravelled.

"Education, the sort that is required for the bureaucracy you are raising, is expensive," Brandon said. "The amount of such taught individuals that can be taken from their existing occupations is limited, if you want to avoid harming the kingdom. The only group that can consistently afford to provide these people are the Regals. No one else has the tradition, the learning and the coin. Do you believe it coincidence, that the Praesi purges focused on the nobility? It was not only to quell rebellion. It was to make Callow *dependent* on the Empire for able rule."

"A dependency that needs to be excised if the kingdom is to remain independent," the Adjutant finished mildly. "You are aware, I believe, of Catherine's opinion on rule by right of birth. What you describe could be considered informal return to aristocracy."

"There will always be wealthy men and women," Brandon calmly replied. "This cannot and should not be avoided. Without the

ancient privileges of titled nobles checking her actions, the queen maintains supremacy by right of unquestioned appointment and dismissal. What worth is there in robbing yourself of talent for empty antipathy?"

The orc's fangs flicked into view for a heartbeat before being sheathed again.

"Well argued," the Deadhand said.

Brandon inclined his head in thanks, mostly to hide the relief on his face.

"All of this, of course, is contingent on the Regals moderating their actions," the Adjutant added calmly.

The Grandmaster's jaw clenched. He had come seeking concession, and would be leaving forced to promise them instead.

"I understand your worries," Lord Hakram said. "Command without success is a stone around your neck. A promise to you, then: get your house in order, and the partition of Liesse will be a matter reopened to debate."

Brandon met the greenskin's eyes, finding only patience and calculation there.

"It will do," he replied.

Gods, it would have to.

—

Lady Julienne tightened the cloak around her. She'd had to sneak out of her own home in servant's livery with her face hidden, like a sneak thief. It was mortifying, but she was not in a position to refuse instructions when given. She was being held by the throat, and the slightest flick of the wrist could see her neck snapped. The tavern she'd been told to enter had no sign hanging above the door, the sure sign of miserliness and filth awaiting, and the smell of piss wafted from the nearly alley. She'd not even entered and already she was nauseous. The inside was barely better. A disgusting dirt floor lay at the bottom of a single large common room with a wooden counter at the back. A few tables with ramshackle benches took up most of it, with a pair of alcoves made of hanging cloth flanking each side. Left side, last alcove. That was what the message had said. The aristocrat hurried there, dismayed at the filth her riding boots was being stained with. Within awaited a woman, seated on a seat without even a cushion by a low table that was nothing more than a wheel on likely stolen pavestones. She doubted the owner of this tavern had ever paid taxes in their entire life.

"Should I order a tankard?" the Thief asked, smiling thinly.

"That will not be necessary," Lady Julianne stiffly replied.

She took the seat across, certain she was going to need to have the cloak burned after she returned to her mansion. The Named seemed indifferent to her reply, drinking deeply from a tankard of dark and thick ale. *Disgusting.*

"Business, then," the other woman drawled. "How's your knitting circle coming along?"

The aristocrat frowned, glancing meaningfully at the common room. It was only half full, with perhaps two dozen people pouring trash down their throats, but speaking of private matters in the open was pure foolishness.

"Oh, you don't need to worry about," the Thief said.

"With due respect," Lady Julianne began.

The Named rolled her eyes and sharply whistled. Without a word, every single person in the room rose to their feet and walked out the door. Including the bald, one-eyed man she presumed to be the owner by the looks of the ragged apron he wore. The sight of it had her blood running cold. Not a single one had hesitated, or spoken a word. Even the drinks were still on the table.

"I own everyone in this street, one way or another," the Thief cheerfully said, but her eyes remained cold. "Even you, Julianne Guilford. Now tell me about the Regals."

"I did as you bid," she replied darkly. "Whenever Talbot is elsewhere I encourage Farron to take harder lines, and when we hold council I stand by him whenever it is not suspicious."

"And our dear friend Samuel Farron," the monster said. "He's still intent on his little coup?"

"He still wants to oust Talbot, yes," Lady Julianne said. "His support is not broad enough, but it is growing."

"Good," the Thief nodded. "You're going to continue supporting him. Gather all the hardliners behind him. Every last one, no matter what bribes or cajoling it takes."

"I know what you're doing," the aristocrat hissed. "You're setting him up. Forging a pretext for a purge."

"Come now, don't be absurd," the villain chuckled. "We already have one of those. The moment your clique got their hands on a matter under seal, there was going to be blood. That one is on your heads, not ours."

"This is murder," Lady Julien accused.

"No," the Named replied. "Murder's what I want to ask you about. Tell me about Valerie Hadley."

"Brandon Talbot's steadiest ally in council," the aristocrat said. "She argues for moderation and seeking the queen's favour, as a rule."

"That's interesting," the Thief mused. "Since she's been moving around large sums of gold she shouldn't have without visibly purchasing anything. When Farron went on about having Ratface killed, what was her stance?"

Lady Julienne frowned, scouring her memory.

"She did not speak on the subject of Lord Qara's assassination," she finally said. "It was Grandmaster Talbot that went on a tirade against."

"You're going to pay very close attention to who she talks to," the other woman ordered. "Especially if she'd been in contact with foreigners."

"Half the Queen's Council is foreigners," Lady Julienne sneered.

"That's an interesting hill for you to make a stand on, Julienne," the Thief noted. "If you'd extended that beautiful patriotism to foreign *money*, we might not be having this conversation."

"I didn't know," the aristocrat protested. "They presented themselves as--"

"Guild-certified merchants, I'm well aware," the blue-eyed woman shrugged. "Shame that was a Proceran front, and you ended up both in debt and guilty of high treason. Funny how these things go, isn't it?"

"I am no traitor," Lady Julienne insisted. "My only fault is being fooled."

"One of your several faults was telling Cordelia Hasenbach about the state of the smithies in Vale in great detail," the Thief corrected. "Which allowed her to learn we were funding them, which in turn allowed her to deduce the Tower's been tight-fisted with equipment. Congratulations, you've passed information about the war readiness of the Army of Callow to a nation about to invade us."

The noble *had* thought the terms of her deal with the merchants were perhaps too lenient, and so been compliant when a very reasonable request about information on Vale blacksmiths had come. Her interlocutors were debating opening a smithy of their

own, she'd been told. That one mistake was all it had taken for the monsters to take hold of her.

"I erred, perhaps," Lady Julianne darkly said. "But that is a lesser sin in the face of your actions."

"People keep telling me there's only of those," the blue-eye woman drawled. "It's called defeat, allegedly."

The aristocrat's fingers clenched.

"I know who you are, Vivienne Dartwick," Lady Julianne said. "Your house is still respected, in the right circles. You shame it by being the servant of butchery."

The Named drank from her tankard, then lightly set it down.

"You ever gardened, Julianne?" she asked.

Warily, the noblewoman shook her head.

"Neither have I," the Thief mused. "Not the kind of dirt I like to have under my nails. My father, though? He loved it. Wouldn't hear of hiring a gardener, spent hours kneeling in dirt. There was this one tree he loved most of all, a gift from my mother. One morning, I found him in our garden. And to my surprise, he was taking a hatchet to that tree. I asked him why, and do you know what he told me?"

Lady Julianne shook her head again. The monster smiled.

"Sometimes," the Thief said. "The healthiest thing for a tree is to *prune* it."

Court III

"Power is a blanket that never covers quite as much as you need it to."

– Queen Matilda the Elder of Callow

Vivienne had learned to enjoy prowling the nights of Laure, though Callow's capital city would never be as dear to her as Southpool. Back home, in the serpentine alleys of fat brick houses where she'd first learned her trade, she could orient herself without a thought. It had come naturally, an instinct birthed out of thrill and theft. Navigating Laure's cluster of disparate districts, in comparison, had been an acquired taste. Much like ale, and as the drink she'd once thought little more than bitter brew it had artlessly become a part of her life she no longer bothered to question. She liked the Lakeside District most of all, even though years of stifling rule under Governor Mazus were only now beginning to be recovered from. The docks there different from the quiet piers of Southpool that became

barred every night: here activity thrummed even after dark. The taverns were part of it, for every drink peddler unable or unwilling to afford guild membership had opened some grimy temple there for sailors and the destitute to frequent. But it was more than that: Laure never truly slept, least of all here. The royal palace might be the heart of the city, but as far as Vivienne was concerned it was Lakeside that held the soul.

Even in the dark barges came to rest against the long rickety docks of the Regalian, officially a customs house said to be built from what part of the remains of a Praesi flying fortress had not been claimed by House Alban. Less officially, it was the spring well of everything in Laure that shied away from the eyes of the law. The place was beautiful, in its own way. Youths from Denier or Southpool coming to trying their luck in the capital disembarked with nothing but the clothes on their backs, smugglers paid their dues to the Guild of Smugglers to avoid having their cargo inspected – unaware that a cut of the coin ended up in Ratface's treasury regardless – and even fishermen out late to try part of the lake without competition from the guild of their trade and its ancient rights. It was alive in a way that the cleaner parts of the district weren't. The Colonnade and its worn statues of the seven first Alban rulers had been kept clean and quiet by men with cudgels since the aftermath of the Conquest, when the stone anchorage had been the closed demesne of the Praesi and their favourite Callowan cronies.

The Whitestone District reminded her of that stilted place, Vivienne decided as she moved from rooftop to rooftop in silence. Oh, it was easy on the eyes. Wide sprawling avenues holding noble manors and beautiful guildhalls. Gardens every few intersections, paid for by the contributions of those that owned property in the district. The locals did enjoy being separate from the rest of Laure. They'd had their own watch as well, once upon a time, though Catherine had disbanded it after her coronation with a look in her eyes that was all savage glee. Sometimes Vivienne forgot the Queen of Callow had been a nobody orphan but a few years ago, and one used to being stepped on by foreign and homebred lords alike. She had not forgotten a single slight from those days, the Black Queen. As was their people's way. Thief slid down a tiled roof onto a warding wall, then leapt across onto a rain gutter and rode it down to someone's darkened garden.

She did not *need* to travel this way, not truly. A single flash of the queen's seal and there was not a gate in the city that would be barred to her, nor a watchman that would dare disobey her orders. But there was a part of Vivienne that would never be comfortable with the power that came from her status. The Woe, she knew, were highborn in a way that highborn themselves could only dream of being. Close companions to the queen, and Named. No land or riches came from holding one of those, but they brought authority in a way that neither could. It was a gilded cage.

Though, praise where it was due, none of the Woe had been taken in by it. Hierophant rarely left the still half-built Observatory if he had to, Archer spent more time Lakeside than in the palace and Adjutant spent his hours putting out fires across the kingdom. As for Catherine, well, she had no love for the crown. The frank admission by the Queen of Callow that she'd abdicate in a heartbeat if it didn't carry the risk of collapsing the country had been a great reassurance to Vivienne. Second Liesse had... changed Catherine in many ways. Made her more cautious, more prone to avoiding confrontation. The weight of a hundred thousand souls lost was still bearing down on her shoulders.

Caution, though, did not mean lethargy. They had been watching. Waiting. Measuring. And now that Lady Valerie Hadley had tipped her hand, Thief had been freed to act. The Valewoman's mansion was not truly her own, Vivienne had learned. The Hadleys had not been wealthy enough to rank a house in the single most expensive district in the Kingdom of Callow, and even within the Marquisate of Vale had not been considered among the influential houses. Landed knights, kept afloat by the rent of their few fields to farmers. Some connections to the – once-disbanded by the Black Knight but now reinstated by his very pupil – Guild of Smiths had been rumoured, but nothing definite. Lady Hadley had been gifted the low wall Vivienne was currently climbing and the house beyond it by Baron Richard of Holden, two years before the Liesse Rebellion and the subsequent crucifixion of the man when it failed. *For services rendered*, the deed had said. The Eyes of the Empire had two scrolls on the matter, and she'd been in their sights as a possible rebel element ever since – even though she'd spent the Liesse Rebellion in Laure, never taking arms with the rebels.

Vivienne had wondered, ever since the name came across her desk, whether she was an agent for a foreign power. It would have been an explanation for the quantity of coin she'd begun moving around last month. Yet there was no evidence of collusion with the Principate or the Tower. It had been venturing down the rabbit hole Brandon Talbot had emerged from that shed some light on the mystery. Valerie Hadley had discretely hidden a handful of the knights that came out of the woodworks to found the Broken Bells for half a decade, at her own expense. That the Baron of Holden had seen fit to reward her for it had interesting implications – he must have been part of the conspiracy that kept Callowan chivalry alive under the occupation – though given the death of the man and the end of his line's rule they were now largely irrelevant. It'd been telling, though. Hadley had kept knights hidden and funded at a time where such a thing would have landed her on a table with Praesi mages dissecting her memories before summary execution if she were caught. She was either patriotic or hard to frighten. Perhaps both, Vivienne had eventually decided. It would explain how this night had come to be.

Midnight Bell had already passed, but there were still lamps lit in the gallery that overlooked the small pond and garden below. Thief was amused by her glimpse of the tall open windows that made up most of the wall. She was fairly certain Governor Mazus has once taxed properties according to the height and length of windows, and given the multitude of those in the mansion perhaps there was an explanation to be found about why Baron Richard had been so willing to cede the deed of his beautiful mansion to a stranger. Thief crept across the grass silently and melded into the shadows at the base of the wall as a household guard passed through the garden. She could have used her aspect to avoid the need entirely, but relying on the arcane was a good way to get sloppy. *And sloppy thieves die young, here and everywhere.* The climb was easy. Decorative bas-reliefs made for easy footholds and there were plenty vines and shadows to hide in when the next guard passed. Thief's silhouette stood wreathed in moonlight for a heartbeat when she crouched on the windowsill, but when a breeze set the curtains to moving and Hadley glanced to the side she was already gone.

Lady Valerie, she saw, was alone at the high table with ledgers and household papers. A mostly full carafe of wine sat to the side, alongside a cup. That simplified matters a great deal. **Hide**, Vivienne thought. Steps barely even a whisper, she stood behind the woman and fished out a little parchment satchel. The pale powder within sunk into the cup of wine without a sound, leaving no trace. Praesi had a way with alchemies of all kinds, it had to be said. Thief poured double the dose, as Hadley did not strike her like a heavy drinker. It was only after the Valewoman drank from the cup that Vivienne pulled out the seat to her left, allowing her aspect to ebb. Valerie Hadley cursed and reached for the knife at her hip, fumbling with the sheath, and Thief dropped into the sinfully comfortable chair with a sigh of pleasure.

"Good evening, Lady Valerie," she said.

The words stilled the woman, though her eyes were still touched by fear.

"Lady Thief," she replied, voice thick with that slow Valean drawl. "The queen's own Left Hand. I suppose I should feel flattered."

Vivienne smiled. She was, at least, not one of that particularly despicable breed of plotters that flinched and mewled when their schemes were brought to light.

"Feel free, if that is your preference," she shrugged. "We were overdue a conversation, don't you think?"

"And they said the queen would be no tyrant," Hadley said darkly. "That she might have been taught by a monster, but that in the

end blood would win out. So much for *that*. Am I to disappear into a dark cell now, Vivienne Dartwick?"

"No. No, there will be none of that," Thief softly said. "I am here because I wanted to hear you speak. Look you in the eyes myself. It is a weakness, I suppose, but to be Named is to have your flaws swell along the rest of you."

"I have done nothing wrong," Lady Hadley said. "You know this as well as I."

"If you'd taken Proceran coin, I would hold you in contempt," Vivienne admitted. "I would outright despise you, if it had been the Tower's instead. But your little conspiracy was Callowan, from beginning to end, wasn't it? A handful of lords and ladies gave you coin, but most came from common folk. No conspirators they, only men and women afraid of what this land has become."

"A kingdom is more than crown and court," the woman replied. "How many despise the Black Queen's rule, I wonder? Mere hundreds were enough to pay the price and some, but I suspect could have found thousand more."

"It's not Catherine you bought the death of," Thief said. "It was Hakram. Clever of you, given how deeply he is needed. Even cleverer to avoid the Guild of Assassins and reach out for Praesi killers. The Jacks are near blind in the Wasteland."

"You found out anyway," Hadley smiled bitterly.

"The coin is what caught our attention, but that was inevitable," Vivienne noted. "It would not have been enough to warrant action, as you no doubt believed. Hanging you on such thin grounds would have tarred Catherine's reputation. But your hired killers paid the Guild of Smugglers to cross the border, the fools, and that allowed us to unravel the whole thread."

"I did not choose him for being an orc," Lady Valerie said. "Let that be known. It is a disgrace for one of his kind to hold high office in Callow, but hardly warrants murder. No, I soiled my hands because without him the Black Queen would finally need to rely on *us*. Her own people. How foul a truth, that it would take so large an absence before she even pondered that."

"I've thought the same, on occasion," Vivienne admitted. "The Kingdom of Callow is born anew, and yet the highest offices are nearly all held by foreigners. Loyal to Catherine first and foremost, without any genuine love for the land they rule in her name."

"Then you understand why this is necessary," the woman said, leaning forward. "This is a farce, Thief. Kendall stacks the court and the officers with merchants and eldersmen that will

never gainsay her, cowed by her high birth and favour with the queen. The very Queen's Council has a *single Callowan* sitting on it and half the south will be parcelled away to legionaries? It is madness. It cannot go on. Better we suffer retaliation for the Deadhand's death than do nothing. Sacrifices had to be made."

"It won't happen," Vivienne said quietly.

"The Adjutant's death?" Hadley chuckled without humour.
"Obviously."

"No," Thief replied. "Liesse being partitioned. It was never going to happen, you see. I leaked a false document to someone I knew the Regals had cultivated."

Blood drained from the other woman's face.

"I would have done without even that," Vivienne noted. "I wanted to falsify the entire accusation and finish it all months ago, but I suppose Catherine needed to be *sure*. That they really would go that far in their disregard."

"This is murder," Lady Valerie said coldly. "Cold-blooded, calculated murder."

"Is it?" Thief mused. "It relied on the actors involved being willing to cross the line on their own. At no point was coercion involved. That was, to my understanding, the entire point of it. As for you, Hadley, you tried to wield a knife. The moment the hand touches the handle, one must be willing to suffer the consequences."

"How eager you are to excuse tyranny," the other woman snarled. "You are the willing servant of this kingdom's woe. I hope you drown with the rest of us, when all accounts are finally settled."

"The funny thing is that I'm trying to achieve exactly what you want," Vivienne said. "Putting Callowans in high office. Kendall is... unreliable, in my eyes. Willing to rebel yes, but also willing to bend with the wind. The Regals are much less prone to that flaw. But you had all these *others* flaws, you see. They had to be fixed before an argument in your favour could be made."

"You try to tame us like a pet," Hadley mocked. "How many will you slaughter, before we bow deep enough for your tastes?"

"Your radicals were already dead," Thief shrugged. "They were too large a vulnerability. We couldn't risk the Tower or the First Prince agitating through them when the armies are at the borders. Hakram argued for acquiring leverage instead of a thinning, but there was only so much of that to be found. Better to be sure."

"Weeping Heavens," Lady Valerie hoarsely whispered. "You own Julianne. You've had her gather every true patriot behind Farron so they can be slain in a single stroke."

"For months now," Vivienne agreed quietly. "Of course, we won't be the ones throwing accusations. There'd be too much doubt. But before the night is over, Grandmaster Brandon Talbot will come across evidence of the conspiracy. There was some argument about whether leaking a matter under seal was enough, but I won that round. The entire faction will be implicated in your assassination plot. We expect Talbot will bring the evidence of it to the palace within the hour. He'll request a purge himself, and who would doubt the very founder of the Regals if he says there's rot in the flesh?"

The Valewoman spat to the side.

"You use a good man for ugly purpose," she hissed.

"We use all sorts, Hadley," Thief said. "One might argue that is our tell-tale mark. Lady Julianne will sadly be jailed for a time, but eventually manage to squeak away from the fallout with a mere fine due to lack of evidence. And after the remaining Regals gain in prominence, securing the withdrawal of the Liesse proposal, she will stand a lightning rod for any emerging rebellious elements. We learned from the Empire, you see. Best to lead your own opposition if you can."

"How well you have learned the ways of the Enemy," Lady Valerie sneered. "You masquerade as its better while using the same means towards the same ends."

"I'm starting to understand it, just a little bit," Vivienne murmured. "Why she got so *angry* when we talked. Because there's a reason I'm on this side, Hadley, and it's not because I somehow enjoy killing my own people – no matter how misguided they might be. But the Woe? We're small fish in a very large pond. And if you can't even handle us, how could you possibly handle the the Empress and the First Prince? All the while you get all righteous about what we do, but if we actually *gave you the rein* you'd drop this entire kingdom in the fucking deep end within the month. Sure, we're the godsdamned Enemy. You get to have that. That doesn't mean you're somehow fit to rule."

Hadley laughed harshly.

"And who are you trying to convince, villain?" she said. "All this talking, yet beneath all I see is blood spilled out of fear. You know you forge your own doom with every action."

"Doom is our business, Lady Valerie," Vivienne said. "We know it more intimately than you ever could. And as for blood, well..."

Thief smiled coldly.

"I was told, you see, that sacrifices had to be made. So they have been."

A heartbeat later, Lady Valerie Hadley slumped down onto the table. It was impressive, that willpower had allowed her to last that long. She wasn't dead, of course. No, killing one of the foremost Regals in her own home would endanger all of this. But she would sleep like the dead, unable to wake up for at least a day. By which time she would be in a cell, unable to escape and awaiting her trial. Thief snatched the carafe and drank deep. She wiped her mouth, after, knowing her fingers came away stained as if by blood.

"Long live Callow," Vivienne Dartwick murmured. "And Gods forgive us all."

Fatalism I

"There is enough room to fit the entire span of Creation between the Heavens and the mouths of priests."

– Antoine Merovins, twenty-second First Prince of Procer

It'd been the Battle of the Camps that started the fire.

Cordelia, in retrospect, could see how it had all unfolded. If the army under Amadis Milenan had been defeated by mortal arms it might have been possible to smother the first flames before they caught, but the Black Queen had not deigned to offer that opportunity. The Prince of Iserre could have been ruined in the High Assembly if he'd blundered and lost dozens of thousands on some Callowan field to a superior general, but who could castigate him for deaths borne from the sky opening over his army? You might as well blame a man for a storm or an earthquake. Milenan had then made pacts with the Callowans and promptly surrendered himself into their hands as a guarantor of that truce. He was a folk hero in Alamans lands, now. The selfless prince who had put his life in the hands of the savages to spare his soldiers a slow and painful death. A true exemplar of Proceran *noblesse oblige*. His royal confederates had not even waited until they returned to the Principate before beginning to lionize the man through letters and songs. Even rats could man a ship, when the alternative was sinking.

There could be no serious effort to place the blame on the Grey Pilgrim, either, even if he had been the informal leader of the Chosen with the northern host. Aside from the Levantine hero's own leave of absence as a hostage in Laure, it would have hollowed the Grand Alliance from within to besmirch the reputation the Dominion's favourite son. Alienated quite a few heroes as well, and not only those that shared his origins. Every

report Cordelia had received about the short assembly of every Chosen before they split between armies had hammered home the implication that the White Knight might be the presumptive leader of the heroes of the Tenth Crusade but that the Peregrine was highly influential. Mobilizing Chosen was like herding cats at the best of times, and the First Prince felt ill at the notion of having to do so after having publicly disgraced their communal kindly grandfather. In the face of earthly powers, the heroes tended to close ranks: they would see this as an outright attack.

In the end, no one could be blamed – which meant everyone was to blame. Especially the Black Queen and her cadre of wicked fae and perfidious villains, served willingly by her armies of Callowan heretics, but there'd been no lack of fault thrown about within the Principate. Most of it had been laid at her feet. She was losing grip on the princes, she'd said. After all, her own subjects had preferred making truce with the Black Queen to fighting until the end. The Levantines had snickered in the beards, making sly comments about the worth of Proceran soldiery. Cordelia had spent many a sleepless night containing the damage, making pacts across the entire eastern belt of principalities to ensure the retreating army would be supplied and reinforced on its march south to join her uncle in waging war against the Carrion Lord. It had all come to nothing, as not even a fortnight passed before the news of the bloody draw at the Red Flower Vales reached Salia.

In terms of fighting forces, the battle had been costly yet no great wound. Military superiority had been maintained by a wide enough margin the remaining armies of the Black Knight could be ground to dust on an open field. In matters of reputation, however? It had been a crippling blow. Uncle Klaus' repute would not be so fragile a single reversal would upend it, but the Lycaonese had *enemies* in the south. Like poison in the wine the rumours had spread that the Iron Prince had grown doddering in his old age. That Cordelia had known of his senility yet ignored in an attempt to bring glory to her kin. It had been a crack in her pedestal, and now the jackals had bared their teeth. The coalition of royalty that had seen her rise to the throne, Lycaonese and northern Alamans, had remained loyal. But the the edges of her majority in the Highest Assembly had frayed. The tipping point had been one of the harshest arguments she'd had with her uncle that she could remember. She'd wanted him to split the army at the Vales and send half of it in pursuit of the Carrion Lord's legions, but he had flatly refused. Bayeux would burn, he'd said, and perhaps Aisne as well – but then the Praesi would find themselves surrounded and crushed. By remaining at the Vales he was forcing Callow to remain on the defensive and readying the snatch the initiative as soon as the passes were cleared.

In matters of military strategy, Cordelia trusted none more than Klaus Papenheim. Yet he was failing to see the broader canvas in which he took action: the Prince of Bayeux had signified that his vote could no longer be counted on the very evening he'd learned that his principality would see no reinforcements. His kinswoman in Aisne put forward a motion of protest in the Assembly the following day, and though it was defeated it could be understood from the public denunciation that her vote would no longer be for sale at further sessions. In the wake of that blow, like carrion to carnage, the self-proclaimed Kingdom of Callow had sent formal request to join the Grand Alliance.

The feeding frenzy that ensued was a *heinous* thing.

It'd been impossible to keep it quiet. Half a dozen Ashuran committees would be presented with the papers, and it was a certainty at least one of the sitters among them would have a loose tongue – and that was without even considering the Levantines, whose lords and ladies argued about even their *own* state secrets in broad daylight. The viciousness of the rhetoric that followed surprised even the First Prince, who had once believed she knew the worst the Assembly had to peddle. The Arlesites principalities had been lukewarm at the notion, many more concerned by the massing armies of the League than any matters Callowan, but the Alamans? Three different princes spent half an Assembly session railing at the heresy inherent in treating with a woman the House of Light had declared abomination. War on Callow must be prosecuted to the last holdout, every trace of Evil scoured from that backwards kingdom even if it took torches to see the business done. A choice had to be made, then, in how Cordelia would spend her influence. She could either make quiet concessions and assurances behind closed doors so that no coalition of princes numerous enough to unseat her formed, or she could call in every favour she'd accumulated since her crowning to have the proposal shoved through the Highest Assembly's throat.

She'd been teetering on the brink of a decision, when Catherine Foundling called on her. That hard-eyed young woman bearing a mantle of power with eerie nonchalance, speaking of peace and treaties and alliances even as she raised thousands from the dead and split the sky asunder with her wrath. The greatest warlord of their age, with a string of impossible victories to her name – against her own people, yes, but also the Wasteland and the legendary hosts of the fae. She'd murdered a god, it was whispered. She had tricked a Choir into resurrecting her, laughed in the face of the mercy it offered. It took will, Cordelia knew, to deny even the shadow of the Heavens. That smiling girl in faded plate had borne the full weight of their hatred and *walked away whole*. Her madness must be one beyond measure. What kind of titanic arrogance did it take for a young girl to believe she knew better than even the Gods? And yet when she had sat across

Cordelia in that strange shadowed world, she had made a reasonable offer. Abdication, if on her own terms. Alliance against the Empire, for assurances of Callowan independence. And so the First Prince had hesitated.

Then reality had come calling, of course. It was a tempting offer, as devils were wont to provide, but it would shatter the Grand Alliance. The Dominion's highborn would never brook such a compromise willingly, and twisting their arm into accepting it would make it certain Levant would withdraw from the Alliance the moment the Tenth Crusade ended. The Thalassocracy might agree, as Magon Hadast disliked having his finest war fleets abroad while Nicae stirred near his belly, but it was no sure thing. And if Cordelia accepted the Callowan offer, backed it in the Highest Assembly and proposed it to the Grand Alliance only for it to be spurned by her own allies? She would be unseated within the month. For a moment she dared to walk the line anyway, to try to secure such an overwhelming diplomatic *triumph* that not a soul would be able to deny she had won the war with words instead of swords. It failed, of course. Foundling trusted her no more than Cordelia trusted the other woman, and seemed to have grown more reluctant to slay her people since the Liesse Rebellion – even if such a sacrifice would ultimately result in a lesser loss of lives. It had been the correct choice, she knew.

And still, sometimes, she thought of the cold bleakness in the Black Queen's eye. Of the woeful oath she'd spoken. She did not sleep well, on those nights, if she slept at all. Her attendants had grown skilful at masking the circles around her eyes with powders, and brews by the palace alchemists kept her sharp when rest eluded her. Cordelia felt a well of gratitude for her handmaidens, smiling at the envoys she was sharing tea with. They would have pounced on even the smallest hint of weakness. Ashurans of the sixth citizenship tier were notoriously cutthroat.

"The matter of partition will need to be addressed in writing sooner or later, Your Most Serene Highness," the tanned young man said.

Ahirom Seneqart, his name was. He was a frequent patron of the pleasure house nearest to the palace, and quite loquacious after sharing a bed with nubile young men. Never less than two. A man of great appetites, this one. Cordelia, as the ruling Princess of Salia, had naturally inherited the ancient web of informants that counted every madam and bawd in the capital. It was ancient Proceran custom to sift through the pillow-talk of foreign envoys to better outwit them.

"You are most correct, Sitter Ahirom," the First Prince said.

No coquettish smile for this one. His tastes ran exclusively to the other sex, if his spending habits were any indication.

Instead she sipped daintily at her cup – an Ashuran leaf from Smyrna, as a courtesy – before setting down the porcelain.

“Yet it strikes me as premature to set in stone such terms before the end of the crusade has come in sight,” she continued. “I have long admired the methods of the people of Ashur, who ever choose steady deliberation over hasty mistakes.”

“The people of Ashur have deliberated over this matter, First Prince,” Ahirom’s grim-faced companion replied. “The conclusion is being presented to you.”

The other speaker for the committee assigned the task of overseeing the Thalassocracy’s actions within the Grand Alliance. A woman, this one, and in Cordelia’s opinion quite the incompetent. Sitter Adonia had quite the imposing presence, tall and well-proportioned with long dark hair going down to the small of her back. She’d been a fleet commander of some renown, before rising two tiers in the wake of her crushing of a small armada of corsairs from the Tideless Isle. Quite good with a cutlass, allegedly, but in matters of diplomacy she was the proverbial stone hitting the glass house. She’d been appointed to the committee as a voice for the fleets, Cordelia reminded herself. She was not meant to be a proper envoy, merely the eyes of Ashur’s soldiery in the Grand Alliance.

“It was my understanding that Thalassina has yet to be breached,” Cordelia said, keeping her pleasant smile. “And that High Admiral Hadast’s glorious victory at Nok was followed by a withdrawal.”

A polite way to remind the jackals that requesting that the Wasteland’s only two ports be ceded to Ashur after the conquest of the Empire was somewhat laughable considering the Ashurans had yet to establish any significant presence on the ground. The raids from the coast had to be costing Malicia quite a bit, but they were only that – costly. The Empire still had nearly all its legions in the field, and the sack of Nok had evidently failed to trigger a war of usurpation.

“Let me be clearer,” Sitter Adonia said bluntly. “There will be no repeat of the crusader kingdoms. That method of dismantling Praes has failed. The Thalassocracy agrees with the Dominion’s proposal of forced deportation. When this is implemented, it is only natural for Ashur to inherit the coastal lands of Praes. No other are fit to hold them.”

Cordelia sipped at her tea in silence, eyeing Sitter Ahirom and his uncomfortable look. The implication that the other two signatories of the Grand Alliance would force Procer to agree to certain terms after the Tenth Crusade was impolitical to speak, even if it might be true in essence. Sitter Adonia had failed to mention, naturally, that the Levantines were not all behind that deportation proposal. A significant portion of the Majilis was

arguing for the more moderate position of Praes being purged of its aristocracy and portioned into small Alliance protectorates. A few were arguing for outright massacre, but they had yet to gain any real support. Thank the Gods for that.

"My fellow sitter meant no slight, Most Serene Highness," Sitter Ahirom said, smiling embarrassedly. "Ashur remains committed to all treaties signed, and would never seek to influence the decisions of the Alliance in an unseemly manner. We merely request that the Principate begin to consider the shape of the crusade's aftermath."

"A most reasonable request," Cordelia mildly said. "Yet a full session of the Highest Assembly is not feasible to call with so many princes and princesses warring far from Salia. A treaty of this magnitude would require more than two thirds of the Assembly to be present and acquiescent, without any surrogate casting. You may rest assured, however, that I will raise the matter with the appropriate parties to prepare the grounds."

"There's no need to play coy, First Prince," Sitter Adonia sneered. "We understand how these matters proceed. The committee is willing to recommend to Magon Hadast that the Red Flower Vales, along with Ankou and all attendant lands, be recognized as a natural extension of the Principate."

It had been a very long time, Cordelia thought, since anyone had tried to bribe her with such open contempt. Setting aside that any occupation of Callowan land would turn into a brutal grind of constant banditry and rebellions – they were, for the Heavens' sake, a people that *prided* themselves on inheriting grudges from generation to generation – Cordelia had absolutely no intention of annexing any part of Callow. Would she split it into several kingdoms? Absolutely. It was necessary to ensure that the Black Queen's surviving partisans would not be able to mount any significant bid for power until her memory had faded among the populace and could no longer serve as an effective rallying cry. There were already separatist currents within the region, anyway. The northern baronies were near a kingdom of their own, the Duchy of Daoine was independent even when it bothered to pretend otherwise, and most the south had remained under aristocratic rule until mere years ago: the people there, unlike those who'd lived for decades under Imperial governors, had never entirely abandoned the old Callowan way of life. In the face of the insolent sitter's gaffe, Cordelia allowed displeasure to touch her face for the first time since they'd begun this audience. She cocked an eyebrow and glanced at the other Ashuran.

"An interesting position," she said, a mite coldly, "for the Thalassocracy to take. I am not in the habit of carelessly disposing of lands, nor do I take kindly to attempted *bribes*."

The man looked like he'd plunged his hand into a brazier, and the look he sent at his colleague promised a hard conversation.

"My fellow sitter misspoke, Most Serene Highness," he said. "It appears the coldness of these lands had inflicted her with some manner of fever. Please forget anything that was said."

"I am saddened to hear that the weather has left Sitter Adonia indisposed," Cordelia said pleasantly. "Perhaps she should be allowed to rest, I simply could not bear to be responsible for the ill-health of a treasured ally."

The woman looked furious, but after locking eyes with the other envoy she bit her tongue.

"We would not impose on your patience any longer, First Prince," the man said. "Yet before we take our leave, might I raise a small matter?"

Cordelia debated instructing them to pass the request along to one of her officials as a polite chiding for the utter lack of manners Adonia had offered, but after a moment decided against it. Best to have Sitter Ahirom owe her a small favour instead. He was more malleable clay than most among his committee, and holding the debt without ever calling it in would make him more hesitant to contradict her in sessions where the Levantines were in attendance.

"It would be my pleasure," she said, demurely inclining her head.

Ahirom's smile was rueful. He knew very well what he'd just surrendered.

"A delegation of Speakers from the homeland has recently arrived in the city," he said, if she hadn't known they were coming months before they ever came in sight of Salia. "They mean to consult with the House of Light on some matter of theology. Might I trouble you for the throne's permission?"

The blonde Lycaonese brought the teacup to her lips, mind spinning. This was, in truth, something of an offered courtesy. She did not have the authority to forbid Proceran priests from holding council with the Ashuran cultists. Yet granting official permission would change the nature of the sessions held. It might become an official conclave, however unlikely such an affair was to take place – the Speakers were mystics prone to speaking in riddles, and had no patience for the many scriptures and theologies of the House of Light. In truth, the council would take place whatever she said. Best to give sanction, and in hosting the event on palace grounds ensure she had eyes and ears at the proceedings. If they turned to one of the many Salian cathedrals instead, inserting agents would be a tricky affair to accomplish without ruffling the feathers of the priests.

"You have it, of course," Cordelia smiled. "It is but a small matter, Sitter Ahirom. I will naturally arrange accommodations, for I would not slight the famous sage-priests of Ashur."

She set the affair aside, after the sitter left. She would keep an eye on the proceedings to ensure that whatever priestly squabble emerge did not threaten to spill over into Grand Alliance, but there were more pressing matters to see to. The Levantines were making noises about it being a breach of terms for their hosts to protect Proceran lands instead of taking the war to the Wasteland, ignoring the fact that they'd been asked to march on a *Praesi* army led by the Empress' two finest generals, and she needed to convince the Princess of Tenerife she still had the full support of the throne without committing any more troops to the border with the League. Agnes sent for her just before nightfall. Cordelia did not hurry in a manner that would be unseemly, but immediately set aside any duties that were not essential. The moon was out when she joined her cousin in the palace gardens.

"Woe, Cordelia," the Augur said. "Woe to the north and to the south. Sit and listen, before it is too late."

Fatalism II

"What is it if not sorcery, that I can tax a single belltower in Salia and set half a dozen cities ablaze?"

– First Princess Anaïs of Cantal, referring to the incident that began the First Liturgical War. Later became the Proceran shorthand of 'Salian belltower', referring to a small act carrying disastrous consequences.

As a girl Cordelia had made a deep study of ruling, knowing that she would day inherit Rhenia and intending to serve her people as best she could. Her few journeys south had made her feel the limits of Lycaonese wisdom acutely, and so she had sought answer beyond the traditions of her people: not to simply discard the lessons of her forbears, but to pair them with the learning of other realms. She had looked far, in acquiring tomes. There was little literature of worth out of Callow, save for Jehan the Wise's sharply-tongued memoirs, but the the Free Cities and the Thalassocracy had borne greater fruit. The Ashurans had led a remarkably stable state for centuries in the face of episodic warfare with Nicae and its allies, and their admittedly dry records were worth the reading if one could stomach the tediousness of the minutia. The islanders, however, had few lessons to offer beyond those touching on the establishment and maintenance of a strong bureaucracy. In matters of ruling philosophy, they either parroted the faraway Baalite Hegemony's own sages or lapsed into the mysticism particular to their

national cult. The League, on the other hand, was a treasure trove of learning and scholarship.

Of contradictions also, though that was only to be expected of such a fractious people. The *asekretis* of Delos had bled rivers of ink on the subject of the ideal state, attempting myriad reforms as opposing factions of the ruling Secretariat came to power, and from both failures and success there had been much to learn. Cordelia had modelled the examinations now necessary to enter civil service in Salia on those required to rise higher in the Secretariat, and found them more than adequate a method to root out the highborn parasites who'd infested the city and replace with previously unknown talents. From faraway Penthes, ever bickering with its two closest neighbours and stirring uneasy in the Empire's shadow, she had learned the value of leveraging gold and treaties where force of arms would fail. By the most famous Tyrants of Helike, Theodosius and his always ambitious brood, Cordelia was taught the art of sowing dissent and fear to humble greater opponents.

She considered herself to have first crossed a line when she'd obtained Praesi works, all of which were illegal to possess within the Principate.

Yet there had been wisdom in those as well. Not in the rants and rambles of the most colourful foolsto climb the Tower, but in the likes of the first Dread Emperor Terribilis and Dread Empress Maleficent the Second. It would only be years later, after she was crowned Prince of Rhenia, that her reach grew long enough to acquire more recent Praesi works. Dread Empress Malicia's treatise 'The Death of the Age of Wonders' had cost her a fortune and over sixty dead to acquire a mere incomplete transcription, and what she'd found had been a chilling read. It'd been a lucid, strategic look at the historical failures of the Dread Empire followed by laying out foreign policy that would prevent such disasters from happening again. The suggested rapprochement with Ashur had been the greatest danger among those put to ink, and the cause of many a sleepless night after Cordelia became First Prince. To her dismay, the Prince of Rhenia had found that much the Empress deemed the path to a better Praes was eerily similar to what she herself intended for the Lycaonese principalities. Strengthened internal trade, central oversight of crucial resources, the establishment of common institutions that would make old regional conflicts irrelevant.

The Evil now dwelling in the Tower was unlike any the Principate had faced before, she'd then understood. She had learned what she could from the enemy, and kept those lessons close. Even in those days she'd known there would be a reckoning with the East.

When she'd grown old enough to undertake the diplomatic missions her mother had always disdained and largely allowed to lapse

under her reign, Cordelia had immersed herself in the teachings of broader Procer. There was an old and proud contempt for southern squabbling, among her people, and Lycaonese as a rule paid little heed to the ways of the Alamans and the Arlesites. What did the debates of the Highest Assembly matter to them, they argued, when no matter the ruler no soldiers ever marched north to help hold the passes against the dead and the rats? There was truth in that, but also bitterness that blinded. Beyond the complex tapestry of marriage alliances and shifting interests, Cordelia had found the the heart of Procer's art of rule had been birthed by two books. The first, and oldest, was the work of Sister Salienta of the House of Light. Once royalty in Salamans, after taking her vows she had spent years penning her life's work, the *Faith of Crowns*. One hundred and three pages over which the former princess had attempted to lay out the duties and responsibilities of one ruling over others as a child of the Heavens. It was beautiful prose, in truth, and thought at times it was more liturgy than practical it had very much been intended as manual for blessed rule.

Salienta had been the first to argue that the Right of Iron, the ancient prerogative by which the princes of Procer could war as they wished, was no simple allowance: that regardless of permission, only a just war should ever be waged. She'd spoken of the right of those who toiled over land to own it, of the unholy greed behind taxes serving to enrich instead of serve. It'd been highly contentious at the time, but after open endorsement by the House of Light it had grown wildly popular and the book had since grown to permeate political discourse in Procer. Cordelia herself had drawn on the *Faith of Crowns* when declaring the Tenth Crusade, qualifying it as a just war according to the third definition laid out by Salienta. Still, as much as the writings had resonated with her it was what had come from them she'd studied closest. How, in essence, the royalty of Procer had found ways to follow its instructions to the letter while violating their spirit. The manufacture of 'just cause' to enable wars of expansion, allowing common folk to own the land yet to keep it only for a fee, the complex array of moral pretexts to justify often galling taxes.

Salienta's work had always been closely linked with the power of the House of Light, and so in a way it was no surprise that its first written rebuttal was offered after the last of the Liturgical Wars came to a close. None had ever claimed authorship of the small work simply titled *On Rule*, yet it was an open secret in Procer that its father was Prince Bastien of Arans, the same man who later became the very first of his homeland to be elected First Prince of Procer. Where the *Faith of Crowns* had been a religious and moral guide to dominion, *On Rule* was a dispassionate study of the acquisition and preservation of power. To this day, it was considered impious to a copy of the book, for within it Prince Bastien baldly observed that the House of Light

was an earthly force like any other, with interests and obligations, and should be treated no differently. The book pragmatically advised that guile and treachery were functional tools, if sparsely used, and that it was usually better to be a victor of ill-repute than a saintly cadaver. Going even further, it argued that moral law was a matter different from a ruler's interests and on occasion even opposed to them. There were few princes and princess in Procer who would admit to having such a volume.

Cordelia had never met any royalty south of Neustria who did not.

Therein lay the dichotomy at the heart of the Principate, she'd thought, and she was hardly the first. *To have Salienta's tongue and Bastien's hand*, the saying went. Spoken like an insult, an implicit accusation of hypocrisy, yet it was observed more scrupulously than many laws among Alamans and Arlesites. And herself as well, she was honest enough to admit. There was beauty in the *Faith of Crowns*, but it was no shield for the vicious intrigues that thrived in the Highest Assembly. As the years passed, however, the blue-eyed prince had come to look at the treatises differently. Less as exercises of philosophy and more as inheritances from different eras of Procer. One where the House of Light had been entwined with the ruling class of the realm, another where it had stood rival and opponent. Since the year *On Rule* had been written, the nature of the pillars holding up the Principate had shifted. Though in many ways the victors of the Liturgical Wars, the priests had been estranged from the halls of power just as the once-powerful mages had been. They had kept their wealth, their ancient rights, but their foes had not forgotten the dangers of allowing the House too much influence and so slowly uprooted it from the tallest peaks of Proceran authority. Cordelia had scrupulously observed this habit, save in one matter.

That mistake, she thought, was now coming home to roost.

"Someone organized this," the First Prince of Procer spoke with deliberate calm. "Of that there can be no doubt. The last recorded conclave involving the full priesthoods of the west dates to Triumphant's conquest, gentlemen. This is not *happenstance*."

Three men shared her solar, this morning, none of them younger than fifty. All were Alamans whose tenure as the heads of the informal triumvirate of largest Proceran spy networks preceded her second crowning. Her eyes lingered on Louis de Sartrons, a skeleton of a man with rapacious features and a bald head. As far as the Principate's records were concerned, he was a middling official in the lower ranks of Salia's diplomatic service. In truth man was the highest patron of the Circle of Thorns, an ancient cabal of Salian officials whose charge was to run the

foreign spies of Procer. The Circle had a long tradition of abstaining from politics, providing unflinching service no matter who sat the highest throne of Procer: at the height of the Great War, before it had been clear Cordelia would triumph, the man across from her had provided regular briefings to all major contenders without playing favourites. The blonde did not particularly like him, but she could respect his dedication and sharp competence. The depths of his failure in this particular instance was made deeper disappointment for it.

"We were blindsided," the old man admitted in a rasp. "I've had my people in the Thalassocracy and the Dominion scrambling for answers, but as far as we can tell there is no Ashuran committee behind it and we all know the Majilis has not held session in months. Or even informal council, for that matter. It could be the Seljun, Your Highness, but his position remains weak. He should not have the pull or coin to arrange something so far-reaching."

The Seljun of Levant carried a dozen fantastical titles, though the only one that truly mattered to Levantines themselves was the last: First of the Pilgrim's Blood. Direct descent from the most revered of the Dominion's ancient founders made the ruling line of Levant effectively sacrosanct to its people, but that respect did not historically extend to lords and ladies obeying a Seljun's instructions beyond half-hearted lip service, if even that. The current figurehead ruler of the Dominion, the Most Holy Wazim Isbili, was impotent even by the standards of his predecessors. He was an unlikely culprit in this, Cordelia was inclined to agree. If there was a foreign agent at work, she suspected it would be a committee buried somewhere in the convoluted maze the Ashurans called a government. Still, the failure now at her door was not the Circle of Thorns' alone. Cordelia's gaze shifted to Balthazar Serigny, a hirsute bear of a man with a thick black beard and eyebrows almost defiantly large. Balthazar the Bastard, as his subordinates often called him without a speck of fondness, was former fantassin of common birth who'd ruthlessly risen to the top of the Silver Letters by blackmailing and discrediting his every rival.

He'd thrived there, unsurprisingly, as the Silver Letters were a vicious band of thieves and murderers who'd been skilled enough at the work that over a century ago they became the left hand of the rulers of Procer. The Cordelia's most recent predecessors had used them to keep an eye on the unrulier princes and occasionally sow internal dissent when a faction in the Highest Assembly grew dangerous, though she herself employed them as knives only to remove Eyes of the Empire. Of this shadowy triumvirate, it was Serigny she had the worst relation with. Unlike the Circle, the Silver Letters had taken sides during the Great War and several times tried to assassinate members of her inner circle on Constance of Aisne's behalf. She'd given serious thought to

having him hanged after taking the throne, but it would have antagonized the web of informants she now needed the most to remain in power. Instead she'd made it clear he was on a very thin leash, and that he would immediately begin training the successor she had chosen for him.

"It's not us, First Prince," Balthazar the Bastard grunted, unmoved by the unspoken reproach. "I've shaken every tree in the Highest Assembly and nothing fell out. The Lanterns almost caused a diplomatic accident when they passed through Orense, so they weren't expected in the slightest. Been keeping an eye on our own temple rats ever since, but they're closing ranks. Not a peep out of the priests. They've got a hand in this, sure as day."

"There hasn't been a word out of the House because your pack of thugs was caught out, you blundering fool," Simon de Gorgeault hissed. "Do you know how many pointed questions I've had to answer?"

The man was in his seventies, closely-cropped silver hair topping an angular face that had been a poor fit when he'd still been named Simone but a reputably popular one after the oversight was corrected. He was a lay brother of the House of Light, and unlike the other two men the organization he oversaw was only one foot in the shadows. The Holy Society was more informal channel to the leadership of the House of Light than true web of spies, an association of nobleborn lay brothers and sisters who facilitated dialogue with the throne and occasionally passed along whispers the priests did not prove willing to surrender on their own. He was diplomat as much as he was a spymaster, and Cordelia had sometimes wondered where the man's loyalty truly lay. He'd been in her service for only a few years, while his friendships in the House were decades old.

"I have some questions of my own, Brother Simon," the First Prince said. "It is somewhat offensive that before arranging a conclave the House would not reach out to me."

The silver-haired man grimaced.

"I've told them as much myself," he said. "Yet it appears they consider this to be a religious matter, not a political one, and so consider the throne's involvement to be unnecessary."

"Which begs the question of what exactly that *matter* is, Simon," Louis de Satrons' reedy voice mused. "It's customary for a conclave to be proclaimed openly and the subject of debate announced beforehand."

The leader of the Holy Society sucked at a loose tooth, as if hesitant.

"I am told this is to be a closed session," Brother Simon said. "By the request of a Chosen."

Cordelia stilled. One of the heroes? The Chosen had no formal authority over any priesthood, save for those come of it, yet it would be a lie to say they had no influence. And yet none of the Chosen had caused ripples, when they had first gathered in Procer at the eve of the crusade's first assaults.

"Which one?" the First Prince coldly asked.

"I was refused that knowledge," the silver-haired man admitted. "And warned any meddling by the throne would be severely censured by all participants."

The House of Light could be handled, Cordelia thought, and the Speakers were more mystics than political force, but the Lanterns? The Levantine priesthood considered strife to be a holy duty. If prodded too harshly, they would bare blades without hesitation. That would be utter disaster, the kind of diplomatic incident that could begin a breakdown of the Grand Alliance if it was not carefully handled.

"We will set that offered slight aside for now," she said. "What is the to be the subject of the closed session?"

"Heresy," Brother Simon said. "As pertaining to Callow."

Cordelia did not close her eyes or sigh. She was better-mannered than that, and showing weakness in front of these men would bring no good. The temptation remained there, however, even as her mind raced. A lesser conclave in Salia had already declared Catherine Foundling to be an abomination in the eyes of the Heavens for perverting the sacred act of resurrection for the purposes of Below. This was not a minor thing, yet it carried no true legal consequences and was essentially empty censure unless the declaration was also adopted by the House of Light in Callow. Which it had not been.

Unlike its Proceran cousin, the priesthood of Callow was no monolith of shared practices and beliefs. Distant regions of the kingdom stubbornly denied the leadership of the influential cohort of priests in Laure, who had seen said influence sharply decline with the end of House Fairfax. In the latter years of the imperial occupation, the priesthood of the southern half of Callow had effectively become a separate entity from the rest. The Doom of Liesse had shattered that state of affairs, however, leaving behind disparate packs of clergy preaching stances on the Black Queen that were just as disparate. The centre had largely fallen behind her reign, and parts of the east as well – Marchford heart and soul, as she remained wildly popular there, Summerholm more reluctantly and she was mostly spoken of there as a preferable alternative to Praes. The rest was lukewarm of

opinion, though many priests in the south had involved themselves with Hakram Deadhand's care of the refugee tent cities.

Proceran priesthood often spoke of its eastern counterpart as a backwards cousin, considering its refusal to bestow titles to its own greater than Brother or Sister as archaic and its insistence to rely only on the Book of All Things as scripture as rather misguided. Callowan priests were ever quick to remind their western cousins that their practiced dated back to the founding of the kingdom, when the Principate had been nothing but a mess of warring tribes, and did not shy from sharp reminders that faith could only be tainted by involvement in earthly matters. Still, save for the occasional minor squabble the relationship between the priesthoods had been largely cordial over the last two centuries. It helped, Cordelia, had often thought, that Callowans priests were often more interested in arguing with each other than foreigners. Off-hand, she could think of only one thing that would make them band together.

Foreign meddling.

"Dread Empress Malicia is Arch-heretic of the East," the First Prince carefully said. "Only one person can carry such censure at a time."

"She is *presumptive* Arch-heretic, as the woman who holds the Tower," Brother Simon corrected. "In the absence of a formal declaration, the matter is not writ in stone. And even if it was, the decision of a Proceran lesser conclave would be overturned by a true conclave's own proclamation."

The man was not a fool. He'd immediately understood the first measure she would turn to in order to prevent the blunder: rustling up enough Proceran priests to declare the Empress the current Arch-heretic, preventing the same title from being granted to the Black Queen.

"Atalante is a renowned stronghold of faith in the Gods Above," Cordelia said. "Could such a debate be delayed until representatives from its priesthood arrive?"

They would have to travel by land, the Lycaonese thought, likely through Tenerife. The ruling princess of that principality was a close and trusted ally, who could be counted on to arrange gentle delays. If the First Prince was able to slow down the proceedings, the conclave could still be persuaded to turn aside from this mistake.

"That matter was already settled by secret ballot," Brother Simon said ruefully. "As the Hierarch of the League is of Bellerophon, a city long in the service of Below, it was determined that the priests of Atalante should be considered lapsing in the faith."

The same holds for Delos and Nicae, much less Penthes – which all known to be suborned by the Empire.”

No word was spoken of the Titanomachy, yet Cordelia knew better than to try that particular avenue. Levant had ancestral ties to the Gigantes, while the giants still slew every Proceran to approach their lands. Any approach there by a First Prince would carry *great* dangers.

“Then the House of Light in Callow should be sent for,” Cordelia said, struggling to sound calm. “To justify its anointing of the warlord Catherine Foundling.”

“That cannot be,” the silver-haired man said quietly. “For I am told the priesthood of Callow is to stand judgement as well, for that very blasphemy.”

Her worst fears in this, confirmed.

“Brother Simon, this is a *grave* blunder,” the First Prince quietly said. “There are better ways to return Callow to the embrace of the Heavens. This will be seen as an attack, a spiteful blow in the wake of defeats on the field.”

The man stiffened like an angry cat.

“We speak of holy conclave, Your Most Serene Highness,” he woodenly replied. “Servants of the Heavens do not concern themselves with the sentiments of mundane powers, only that their acts are just in the eyes of Above.”

What is this, if not an act of mundane purpose? Cordelia thought. She could not treat with the Black Queen, if she was condemned a heretic by every signatory of the Grand Alliance. Worse, there would be no treating with *Callow*. The pattern of history there would cut too close to home. After the Fourth Crusade, when a young Principate had turned on Callow after being unceremoniously thrown out of the Wasteland by Dread Emperor Terribilis the Second, there had been attempts to crown one of the slain king’s children as a puppet to ease occupation until the pretence could be safely discarded. Juliana Fairfax had instead cut her own throat at her own coronation, immediately after declaring her rebelling cousin as heir. King Henry Fairfax the Landless had promptly been declared to be Damned by a lesser conclave in Salia, a plot that was deeply reviled in Callow to this day. The recipe here was different, yet too many ingredients were the same: a young ruler who’d fought Praes with distinction, heavy defeat followed by a Salian proclamation of heresy and the perceived collusion of priesthood with an invading force. That the Lanterns and the Speakers joined their voices to the conclave would change little, she thought. How many Callowans had ever seen an Ashuran or Levantine? The kingdom had been closed, under Praes, and now the only living memory of either people was as a

Proceran ally. Even those who despised the Black Queen's reign would have to bow to popular sentiment and fall in line, lest they be accused of collusion with the Principate. And worse yet...

Woe, Cordelia. Woe to the north and to the south.

"I must urgently address the conclave, Brother Simon," the First Prince said.

The old man frowned.

"That would be difficult to arrange," he said.

"Allow me to be perfectly clear," Cordelia Hasenbach said. "It matters not to me how many favours you must call upon, how many bridges must be burned and quiet threats made. This is no longer a question of diplomacy. It is now a question of survival."

Brother Simon's face smoothed out, though not before she read scepticism in the cast of it.

"I understand that the Callowan question of of import to the throne," he slowly said.

He paused to choose his words carefully, and as as backhanded reminder of who answered to the other Cordelia smoothly placed answer to a reply unfinished.

"There is more to this than the affairs of Callow," the First Prince said. "See it done, Brother Simon. By evening tomorrow. Or choose the abbey to which you will retire, after designating a successor less prone to dithering."

She would not allow the Kingdom of Callow to be driven into the arms of Below. She could not.

Not after Agnes had told her the Dead King would be on the march by winter solstice.

Fatalism III

"I fear the man of one book, even if that book is about the pastoral habits of the common Callowan cow. Have you ever looked into the eyes of a cow? They are a depthless abyss of cold nihilism."

– King Edward IV of Callow, the Sufficiently Paranoid

In the days before the founding of the Principate, Salia had been little more than the ancient tribal grounds of the Merovins. Though rich in game and copper – mined, one no longer admitted in polite company, by slaves from rival Alamans tribes – it'd been a modest village of less than five thousand. The Merovins were known as hunters and warriors, not farmers, and had preferred to

raise lodges in now-cut forests rather than gather in a city-fortress as the Arlesites to the south had practiced since times immemorial. That it'd been chosen as the seat of the council that founded the Principate had been due to a potent mixture of luck and politicking by Clothor Merovins. Salia had been well placed to host the armies returned victorious from the First Crusade and the fall of Triumphant, and had represented something of a compromised between the already-squabbling factions of Alamans chiefs and Arlesites kings who both desired the council closer to their own holdings. It was a famous story that Clothor had sold all his possessions, down to his last pair of boots, to bribe the recalcitrant into agreeing.

Like so many stories on which the foundation of realms were built, it was a lie. Clothor had been one of the wealthiest men in the not-yet-Principate, having discretely stolen the Callowan tributes meant for Dread Empress Triumphant that were getting readied when the continent-wide rebellion against her reign began. Still, there was a grain of truth to the story: the man had near-beggared himself buying alliances with lavish gifts and promises, though he had kept his boots. And still Cantal had nearly been chosen at the site instead. It would be a very difference Principate that now stood, Cordelia thought, if the chieftess of Cantal had succeeded at her own intrigues. But Clothor had been both wilier and the better speaker, going on to win the contest and then the crown itself: the very first of the First Princes of Procer. One of his very first orders had been to raise what was now the Chamber of Assembly on the grounds where the celebrated council had taken place, and it was surrounded by those centuries of history that Cordelia Hasenbach now sat.

Salia was now the largest city of Calernia: when winter came around and the labouring *manants* who'd toiled on the fields throughout spring and summer flocked to city with their seasonal wages, near nine hundred thousand souls dwelled within the boundaries of Procer's capital. The city had been turned into a work of art by First Princes and Princesses, spires and churches and sprawling gardens – some of those meant only for winter, even, built so that the frost and snow themselves would become adornments. There was ugliness as well, entire districts of huts where the peasants took sick and died in their own wastes while the wealthy partook in exotic banquets mere miles away. And yet Cordelia had found she loved Salia, for all its flaws, with the same depth she loved the Rhenia of her birth. It was a city unlike any other on the continent, the ever-beating heart of an empire that risen from nothing to stand above all realms that saw the sun. Where else could one find Arlesite poet-duellists declaiming in contest with Alamans lay brothers in gardens that depicted different acts of a play with every season? Or grim-faced Lycaonese veterans trading drinks and war stories with fantassins who'd served in wars halfway across the continent?

The wealth of Salia was in the people, not the coin or the facades, and it was a rare day where the First Prince of Procer did not wake humbled that they had been placed in her care.

Yet in that sprawling, glorious and riotous mess there was one place of utter stillness. One that had not changed since the savage days of Procer's founding, where it had been hard men and women wearing furs and stolen riches – never without a blade, even when bathing – who had changed the world: the Chamber of Assembly, seat of the Highest Assembly of the Principate. The walls were naught but whitewashed limestone, the rafters were ancient oak that creaked when touched and the chamber had carried a faint scent of wood smoke ever since the palace around it caught fire during the second Liturgical War. A halfway-skillful merchant would own finer hall than this after a decade's work, and yet never once had the royalty of Procer asked the chamber should be built anew or replaced. For within there stood twenty-four thrones, none younger than six centuries. One for every principality in the realm, dragged from all over the Principate to stand forever in this room. Princes and princesses ruled from palaces all over Procer, but there was only one Chamber and one Highest Assembly: the words spoken in this smoky hall resounded to every corner of Calernia.

Cordelia's own seat was the same that had been set by Clothor Merovins himself. A spit of grey granite polished by the waters of the lake it'd been dredged from, without even a back to lean against. Cunning Clothor was said to have mourned before all that he'd emptied his treasury so deeply bestowing gifts upon his allies he could not even afford to have a proper throne carved. The blonde prince rather admired the man who'd been her earliest predecessor. A great warlord, yes, but one of the rare examples of that breed who'd understood the worth of the softer ways of statecraft. Many kings and chiefs came to that council with thrones that now stood before her, gilded and set with jewels or made of enchanted stones and rare trees from the Waning Woods. Yet Clothor Merovins' humble spit of granite was the only one that stood on a dais, an inch higher than all the others. In truth, two seats in the chamber rightfully belonged to Cordelia. The same she now sat, and another far to the back.

One of the triplet thrones of Rhenia, Hannover and Bremen, famously carved from the same pale chalkstone on which First Princess Frederonne Merovins had wed the Prince of Hannover, sealing her conquest of the Lycaonese principalities by twining bloodlines. Her own father had died assaulting the walls of Rhenia, where even after the fall of every other Lycaonese principality the hosts had held out with desperate defiance, but Frederonne had shown enough foresight to predict that fighting the Lycaonese to the bitter end would leave her own people to defend against the Plague and the Dead in their stead. Cordelia's Rhenian throne was covered by a silk banner displaying the

Hasenbach heraldry of crowned bronze mountain peak on deep blue, signifying that she had named no sworn delegate and still held the voting rights for the principality. The technical matter was complex, and relied on the legal fiction that she was two different people: the Prince of Rhenia, her birthright, and the Princess of Salia which was a title bound to the greater one of First Prince. Before the last of the Merovins died the principality of Salia had been its own realm and remained under their rule even when one not of their bloodline was First Prince, though the ruler of Procer had right of administration over the city, by custom.

It had been over a hundred years since then, however, and Cordelia had come to benefit from the additional vote and attendant legalities more than she'd ever expected she would.

"The assembly recognizes *l'assermenté* for Prince Amadis Milenan of Iserre," the Master of Orders announced, thickly-accented Lycaonese voice perfectly pronouncing the Old Chantant term.

The white-haired Master was one of her own Rhenians, one with a talent for languages she'd put into place within a month of ascending the throne. In this battlefield of courtesies and ceremonies, there were few advantages more precious than an arbiter of ceremonies entirely loyal to her. Cordelia's eyes blue eyes flicked at the sworn delegate of Iserre, one of Prince Amadis' seemingly never-ending parade of kinsmen of middling talent. Olivier Milenan was young, barely in his twenties, and handsome in much the same way as his very distant uncle. Not the sharpest of intriguers, this one, though hardly slow. She suspected he'd been chosen by Amadis largely because while of princely blood Olivier's branch of the family was impoverished and so the sum entire of his fortunes rested on the goodwill of his crowned kinsman. This one would not cross his uncle, lest he got back to rotting in the gutted mansion where he'd been raised in utter obscurity. Rising to his feet, Olivier Milenan straightened his back.

"By ancient oath, I speak only the words of my prince and none other," he said.

"You were heard by these hallowed grounds," the Master of Orders replied. "Let no lie mar your tongue, no heresy your soul and may the Heavens grant you righteous purpose in this exchange of words."

Every individual in the chamber save those two repeated the sentences with practiced cadence. As First Prince, Cordelia was exempt from such proceedings. As Prince of Rhenia, she was not. Other royals were few in attendance, in this particular session. The rulers Creusens, Orense and Valencis had graced the capital with their presence, as well as her old ally the Prince of Brus,

yet every other was a sworn delegate. It mattered little: their instructions would be royal, if not their bearing.

"My countrymen," Olivier Milenan spoke, his voice well-trained and pleasant to the ear, "I stand before you today to speak of grave matters. The Principate has upheld its duties to Creation and undertaken the waging of just war against the wicked crowns of the East, yet in doing so a heavy price has been exacted. While our armies manoeuvre and quibble, Dread Empress Malicia's hungriest hound pillages and rapes his way through our realm heedlessly. Already Cantal has suffered such depredations, and now my own native Iserre seems destined for the same savage fate."

It had not taken long, Cordelia mused, for the first instruction of the Master of Orders to be disregarded – *let no lie mar your tongue*. The Carrion Lord's horde of murderous vagrants might be looting everything granary in sight, but they at least observed their own regulations: rapists and murderers were hung. The man's rhetorical flourishes were not of great import, though what would follow them was. The First Prince had already deduced the gist of the motion the man would present. She had, after all, a letter addressed to a bastard among her papers. It was the number of those willing to support the motion that truly mattered. This was the first formal session held since the defeats in Callow, though half a dozen informal ones had taken place. The important difference between the two was that in a formal session, any motion put to the First Prince would enter the public records. Including the votes and if her personal Right of Refusal was used afterwards. That she would be driven to that was unlikely, as she should still have enough support they would fail to secure a majority, but it was possible for her and her allies to be forced to vote in a manner that would damage their reputation with the people. *If you have the votes to corner me, Milenan*, she thought. *Do you?*

"Our cities are empty, our fortresses gather dust," Olivier orated, voice resounding. "Why? Because we have sent our soldiers to war, observing the decree of our anointed First Prince. Do not mistake this for intriguing, my friends, for none stand more loyal to Her Most Serene Highness than the braves of Iserre. I merely weep for the fate of my people, who must wither and die even as their valiantly crusading cousins stand leashed and impotent mere weeks of march away. Where is the Iron Prince, I ask you? What right does the Prince of Hannover have to part kin from besieged kin by such cruel decree?"

There were murmurs of approval at that. Uncle Klaus had never been popular down south, in part because he'd led her armies in their crushing of theirs yet also because he himself made no mystery that he held most of them in contempt. His decision – though it had been presented as hers – to let the Legions of

Terror march into Procer without pursuit had only deepened the enmity. The sworn delegate from Bremen loudly spat on the floor, scarred face purple with anger, much to the distaste of the closest southerners. Uncle Klaus had carried her crippled cousin back through five leagues of marshlands under rattling pursuit after a skirmish went south, Cordelia knew. If blades were allowed into the chamber, she might very well have drawn. The Iron Prince was disliked here, but he was fiercely loved by his own people.

"The Prince of Iserre asks not for glory or reward, though for this realm he has greatly bled," Olivier said. "He only asks for loyalty to be repaid in kind, and the heart of Procer to be protected from the foul works of the Praesi. Iserre motions for a formal petition to be presented to the First Prince, requesting that the army under the command of Prince Klaus Papenheim be tasked with the defense of Procer itself."

Cordelia kept her face unruffled. The choice of a petition petition had been a clever trick of procedure, she had to admit, and one that'd surprised her. Milenan was within his rights to make a direct request to the First Prince, though not a demand – the Principate had joined a crusade, which meant she had supreme authority over all armed men and any attempting to wrest it from her would be committing treason. Would that her opponents were such fools. If it had been a direct request, every delegate and royal casting their vote in favour of it would be effectively declaring they had lost faith in her ability to prosecute this war. In the middle of a crusade, that would be costly to their popularity at home as the people's mood had grown distinctly vengeful. A petition to request, on the other hand, would produce a formal document open to any attending sitter's signature that would be presented to her after the session. The vote over the motion itself would not be added to the record, keeping the implicit rebuke to her entirely private.

It was clever in the sense that it allowed principalities neither in her camp nor Prince Amadis' to express their dissatisfaction: they could back the motion to have the petition, then withhold their signature on the document. Young Olivier had been busy in his uncle's service, she realized, and moreso than she had thought. He'd never have presented the motion if he did not believe it would pass. *And when that petition is made passed along to every prince in Procer,* Cordelia thought, *which we both know you will do, the unity of your uncle's own faction will be brought in contrast with my own dying alliances.* With a single act he was forcing her to publicly deny a petition that would be very popular in certain parts of her realm, wounded her prestige in the Highest Assembly and signaled to fence-sitters it might be time to place their coin on the horse pulling ahead. Alamans intrigue at its finest, this: three birds with a single stone, all

headed for the thrower's own kitchen. How best to strangle this, then, before the blow caused a bruise?

"The assembly recognizes l'assermentée for Prince Arnaud Brogloise of Cantal," the Master of Orders announced.

The sworn delegate, her dress and apparel perfect to the extent that even Cordelia could only be admiring, inclined her head respectfully before speaking.

"The Prince of Cantal seconds the motion to petition the First Prince, and moves for immediate vote over it," she simply said.

Striking swift, was it? They *had* succeeded at arranging this under her nose, but assuming victory could be won by simple haste was rather bold of them. The Master of Orders glanced at her and she cleared her throat. His eyes went down to her lap, where he found her hands folded primly.

"The assembly recognizes the Prince of Rhenia," he smoothly said.

There was a ripple at that. The three Lycaonese in the back wore open smiles, and her old comrade Prince Frederic of Brus was leaning forward eagerly.

"The Principality of Rhenia thirds the presented motion," she smiled calmly. "Moreover, it requests for both the vote and preceding address to be entered into the formal public record."

A glint of amusement passed in the Master of Orders' rheumy eyes.

"As per law, such a request can only be granted by the First Prince of Procer," he said. "I now put the question to Her Most Serene Highness, First Prince of Procer, Princess of Salia."

Cordelia inclined her head.

"I grant the request," she simply said.

The blonde prince felt every eye in the room turn to her. Faces had blanked, eyes gone thoughtfully. Even Olivier Amadis had been visibly taken aback before mastering himself and was now staring at her warily. *Wonder now, boy, she thought. What I know that you do not.* Uncle Klaus was preparing for a march north even as session was held, after all. Let the record show Amadis Milenan's own nephew dragging his name through the mud even as the Iron Prince gathered supplies for his march to turn back the Dead King. Let every single one of these vultures be named as the handful that would abandon all of northern Procer to salvage their granaries. *Scrape me raw if you dare, Milenan. I am willing to lose a little skin if in exchange I can have you and your fellows flayed in song in every tavern from Rhenia to Tenerife by*

the year's end. The men who sold Procer. It has a ring to it, does it not? She met the boy eyes and smiled pleasantly.

"Shall we proceed with the vote?" she asked.

Her gaze swept the rest of the room. *And now we find out what worth are the bargains you made, Olivier. Will they stick with you, when they smell a trap? There is no one in this room unaware that he who rides the Ebb must beware of the Flow.* Her prompting added to the sworn delegate from Cantal's had made it inevitable vote would immediately follow before any further discussion could be had. The Master of Orders called on the thrones in sequence, and it was an effort for Cordelia's face not to grow grim. Most of the supporters were expected. Iserre, Cantal, Orne, Creusens, Segovia and Aquitan. Prince Amadis and his closest supporters, those who had been defeated at the Battle of the Camps and were well aware that if the Iserran cause sunk they would soon follow it into the depths. Bayeux she'd expected as well, as parts of its countryside had been torched by the Carrion Lord. Orense, however, was an unpleasant surprise. She had saved its evidently ingrate prince from brutal Levantine raids barely more than a year ago. How quickly gratitude turned to naught. The sworn delegate from Valencis hesitated before abstaining, which was telling. If not for her ploy that would have been another vote in favour. Eight in favour, out of twenty four votes, and it could very easily have been nine. How many others had simply hidden their late change of heart more skillfully?

The motion failed, and she had scored a wound that would not show for months yet, but she could feel the wind turning. The matter of the coming conclave needed to be squashed, lest today's abstentions become tomorrow's knives.

—

Cordelia was not one to easily discard etiquette. Rules were the birthing bed of civilization: common foundation could only be found when people agreed on the most essential standards of behaviour. Etiquette was merely the regulation of relationships between individuals, and while it could be used to oppress it could also be used to free. Rules always cut both ways

Yet if there was one particular set she could grind into dust, it was the stringent courtesies governing audience between the Holies and the First Prince of Procer. It was a throwback of the Liturgical Wars, one no ruler of Procer had every felt quite secure enough to revisit. She was ushered into the Starlit Cloister by a handful of sisters who had taken vows of silence, her personal guard forced to remain outside, and led to a private garden. There she was guided in removing her dress and regalia before submitting to hour-long ablutions that left her without a single speck of artifice. Even her hair was unbraided, made to course down her shoulders without the slightest of stylings. It

was wearing a white shift unflattering to her Hasenbach frame and barefoot that a brother finally sought her out, bowing low before informing her she was to be received.

The entire process was said to be symbolic, a stripping of earthly trappings before she could be allowed to speak with souls untainted by such matters. Cordelia herself was of the opinion that the point of the exercise was to humble the ruler of Procer and disarray them before taking them into the very seat of power of the Holies. It was a gauntlet of rather unsubtle pressure, and one she resented. The Holies, after all, were a purely Proceran notion: an assembly of the leading priests of the House of Light's basilicas and cathedrals, with a smatter of administrators and highborn lay people added to the mixture. Still, unpleasant as this was it was a necessary unpleasantness. While the Holies might not wield authority in any official sense – their very existence was informal, and the requirements for counting among their number opaque to any outside of the House of Light – their influence assured that anything they agreed on would miraculously become policy shortly afterwards.

They must be convinced, at all costs.

The corpulent brother guiding her did so through a handful of sunlit corridors before pausing before a thick oaken gate. He bowed once more, observing the required angle perfectly, and left without a word. Cordelia allowed herself the weakness of a moment's rest to gather her bearings. She silently marshalled her arguments, brought to mind faces and names and associated interests. They could be moved, as all men could be moved. Through the wood she heard a spatter of female laughter and the sound of cup being dropped, brow rising in response. Her hand rose to the heavy iron ring on the door, knocking thrice before pulling. The absence of a footpad to serve that purpose in her stead was yet another petty little test for any seeking audience. The door creaked open, and immediately Cordelia's face stilled. She'd had audience with the Holies only once before, shortly before her coronation, and this was not the ornate hall where she had then been received.

It was instead a cramped arched dining room, filled with only a long table and a handful of seats. In the back a woman was leaning her seat so far back half the legs were off the floor, feet resting atop the table. She was old, skin creased and her forehead mottled with spots under a braid of stark white hair. The eyes, though, the eyes were sharp. Dark and patient.

"Good evening, Your Highness," the Saint of Swords nonchalantly call out.

Her mind spun. She'd set out aiming to find out which of the Chosen had demanded the conclave, and already she had her answer. She absent-mindedly noted a handful of details in quick

succession – there were two cups, not one, and one had been toppled. It'd spilled liquor all over the table. The other goblet was in the hands of the heroine, inclined at an angle that allowed her to recognize water within. They were alone in the room, the only other door behind the Saint, and the chandeliers casting light allowed moving shadows to be cast into the corners.

"Laurence de Montfort," Cordelia calmly replied, inclining her head by the barest of fractions. "An unexpected pleasure. I was led to believe I would be addressing the Holies."

"I sent them away for a walk," the heroine still known in Procer as the Regicide shrugged. "This is a talk for adults, not squabbling children."

Most royalty in her position, Cordelia thought, would be wondering if they were about to be carved up. She knew better. There were matters in which the First Prince did not trust the judgement of her uncle – tax policy, trade, putting his seal to a budget that did not overwhelmingly favour the army – but he was a very sharp judge of character. *A hard woman*, he'd said of the Saint, *but she always means well*. The blonde prince claimed a seat at the opposite end of the table without waiting for an invitation. The Chosen was not the host, here, only another guest.

"I take it this conclave is your work," Cordelia said, settling down and forcing herself to ignore the unpleasant itch of her shift against her skin. "Should I expect the Grey Pilgrim to join us as well?"

"Tariq's busy skinning of the many cats making a racket in your backyard," the old woman dismissed. "I'll be following him as soon as this business is finished."

"And what business would that be, exactly?" she asked. "Your reputation does not mention an interest in statecraft."

The Saint of Swords set down her cup on the table, then dragged her legs down. Her chair returned to the stone floor with a sharp clack.

"I find I am disappointed in you, Cordelia Hasenbach," the Regicide said. "You're promising in a lot of ways, I won't deny. You're taking a hatchet to the rot, however politely, and you've been herding the crowned wolves well enough. But this? You should know better. You're Lycaonese. You know the Enemy's face."

Cordelia cocked her head to the side, keeping the pretence of calm in truth rapidly leaving her.

"Not merely the conclave," she deduced. "It is your own notion to have the Black Queen named Arch-heretic of the East."

The old woman grinned harshly.

"They were eager enough, truth be told," the Saint said. "Just needed a little push. That I needed to give it at all is what got me in such a meddling mood. You're flinching, Hasenbach. You've been down here too long, the iron's beginning to rust."

The First Prince's lips thinned. It had been a very long time since she'd been offered such blatant disrespect.

"You know less than you think," she said.

"'Ol King Bones is stirring, you mean," the Chosen replied.

Cordelia's fingers tightened in her lap, a rare lapse of control on her part. How did she know? Had the Heavens whispered the secret in her ear? No, it did not matter. If she *did* know, why would she act so recklessly?

"You should be aware, then, that further prosecuting the war against Callow is unwise," the First Prince said. "War on two fronts is foolish at the best of times. War on two fronts when one is the Kingdom of the Dead is *lunacy*. We cannot start a life and death struggle with the Black Queen when the marching dead gather north. It will be the ruin of the Principate, Saint. No amount of miracles can make hosts fight two battles simultaneously."

"You mean," Laurence de Montfort said softly, "to make truce with the Enemy. Listen to yourself, girl. Your ancestors would cut your bloody throat for this."

"My ancestors were guarding a handful of passes and crossings," Cordelia sharply replied. "I am charged with the entirety of Procer, and my failure would mean the slaughter of millions. I would rather be censured by the blind dead than watch the risen kind butcher half the Principate. You are gambling with the lives of more people than you have ever seen, Saint. What worth will your soft sentences be, when the Army of Callow falls on our flank and Keter devours the rest?"

"You don't understand what this is, do you?" the Saint smiled. "This is not the War of the Grand Alliance or the second invasion of Callow. It's the *Tenth Crusade*. You slapped the gauntlet down, girl, and now Below's picking it up. There is no compromise to be had anymore, no subtle manoeuvring. You declared war on the Hellgods, and the sword will not return to the sheath until one side falls."

"A crusade can be waged intelligently," the First Prince said. "It must, or it will fail like those before it."

"That's where you misunderstand," the Saint amiably said. "You think all of this..."

Her hand moved to encompass their surroundings.

"Is inviolable," she continued. "It's an understandable weakness. You rule here, after all, and love for your people is no sin. But everything dies, Cordelia Hasenbach. Even empires."

The blond woman paled.

"This is treason," she coldly said. "As good as a confession you seek the destruction of the Principate."

"This whole damned house is *rotten to the bone*, girl," the Saint said. "You've toiled and troubled and fought like lion, but it'll die with you. You know that already, deep down. Maybe the Principate was what it should be, ages ago, but it has not been in a very long time. It's greed and power and lies, hungry wars and treachery made into the mortar of palaces. The sickness is all it knows, now."

"You are mad," Cordelia spoke in a hushed whisper. "Gods Above, your mind has gone and you would take all of us with it."

"Oh, we'll bleed," the Saint mused. "We'll lose *badly*, at first. And then we'll claw our way back up, inch by inch. Evil always wins at the start, but it's us who owns the conclusion. And from the ruins something better will rise. This empire's already a corpse, but we'll send it off with a pyre glorious enough it'll redeem the old faults."

"I will have you arrested," the First Prince of Procer said. "I will have you killed, if that is what it takes."

"You just worry about getting the armies marching," Laurence de Montfort dismissed. "Odds are I won't survive the scrap, but that's all right. It's a good war to die in. It'll be the crusade that settles it, you see: too many old monsters came crawling out on both sides. Won't be the kind of losses a side can recover from."

"You are not listening to a word I say," Cordelia whispered, aghast.

The Saint of Swords rose to her feet jauntily. The First Prince's muscles clenched, though she managed to flinch when the Chosen approached her. The old woman clapped her shoulder.

"Keep your chin up, girl," she said. "Sacrifice is always ugly business, but we'll come through in the end. To rise from the ashes, there needs to be a fire first."

The Saint of Swords strolled out, boots slapping against the stone, and the sound of the door closing behind her was the death cry of an era.

Ye Mighty

"Alas, though your jest was cutting this axe is even sharper."
– Dread Emperor Vindictive

The Lord of Silent Steps was in a pensive mood.

That was only right, as Ivah'idimas'iyanya'ajolig had found much to ponder of late. Being cast out of the Zapohar and forced to seek salvation in the Burning Lands had been meant as humiliation piled onto death, not mercy, and yet... here it was. Still alive, though months had passed. It was a strange thing to outlive one's despair, and stranger still to pass beyond it. Such a matter required contemplation, the guidance of the whispers in the Night, but now when Ivah sought those murmurs known to all of the Firstborn it found only laughter. Full-throated and loud in the complete silence that surrounded it, a clarion call of mockery. And so Ivah of the Losara Sigil knew itself then to be damned, bound forever to the endless white plain it saw when it closed its eyes. It was all it dreamed of, now. Treading a boundless field of snow under a night that knew no moon or stars, leaving neither footstep nor sound as it marched on nowhere. Never tiring, never ceasing. Chasing a cold void forever out of reach.

It was terrifying – and yet it also soothed, like nothing it had ever known.

Clarity was required, and so clarity was sought. Losara Queen was beyond granting such a boon unto the likes of Ivah, for the queen was more akin to a deluge than a person – sweeping all it came cross, drowning them in the depths of itself. One could not bargain with the tides, only obey or perish. Yet there were others, slayers of Mighty that followed in the wake of the flood, and first among them stood the Mighty Archer. It did not claim to be rylleh, yet acted every inch of it regardless. It was presumptuous for the likes of Ivah to approach a superior unbid, though it did regardless as there was great need. It was sprawled against broken pillars, feet propped up close to the flames of a fire as it roasted cuts of silin meat over the flames. The sight of it made Ivah uncomfortable, for it was very unnatural. Humans, it was well known, ate only herbs and stones – as a learned Mighty, Ivah knew the stones were eaten not for sustenance but to help digestion – and became struck with terror when away from the light of the sun. The Mighty Archer must have blood from another race, for there could be no other explanation.

The Firstborn knelt facing the Mighty, arms and hands angled so that it could be seen it held no weapons. The human's strange coloured eyes flicked to it, curious.

"Great Mighty," Ivah said. "I would have guidance in matters of damnation."

"Oh boy," Mighty Archer sighed. "I am *nowhere* drunk enough for this."

Boy. This was cattle-term, yes? Was the Mighty implying such worries as he had expressed were only fit for cattle? Ah, it was reminding Ivah of the ancient text 'Seven Husks of the Moon', which stated that the pursuit of Night was holy act and therefore no ill could come of it. The Lord of Silent Steps slowly nodded. Mighty Archer was truly learned, to know of this.

"Yet in estrangement from the Night, do we not lose our purpose?" Ivah asked.

"Where's fucking Hakram when you need him?" Mighty Archer said. "Look, Ivah, you've got the wrong woman for this kind of talk. Purpose isn't really my thing."

Ivah blinked.

"Should purpose not be sought?" it asked.

"Take it from me, sweetling, the big picture stuff is better left to the worriers of this outfit," Mighty Archer said. "You and me, we're sword arms. It doesn't have to be complicated for us."

The Lord cocked its head to the side.

"Then our purpose is the purpose of Losara Queen," it said. "For it can see what we cannot."

"Now you're getting it," Mighty Archer encouraged. "Sure we've got our rough edges, but this is a pretty good band as these things go. We've even done proper villain stuff, which should tickle your Evil pickle. Abducted a princess the once, and we even stole the sun a while back."

The Firstborn choked.

"Mighty Archer, I would have understanding," Ivah said. "By speaking the sun, do you mean light?"

"Nah, it was the actual sun," the Mighty replied, scratching its chin. "Thief swiped it from that princess we kidnapped. Although we couldn't find a way to pawn the damned thing and Summer ended up stealing it back, so I guess that one should be called a wash. We did ego-murder the two highest entities of fae royalty not long after, though, so all in all we came out ahead."

The Lord of Silent Steps swallowed, mouth gone dry.

"Is it not the power of the Splendid that we wield?" it asked.

"That kind of shit doesn't just lie around, Ivah," Mighty Archer chided. "We had to murder, like, at least five royals to steal it. And the one duke, but I think that was just Cat making a point. Good times."

"It is said the eldest of the Splendid are as gods made into flesh," Ivah said.

The Mighty leaned forward and speared a cut of meat with its knife, bringing it to its lip and biting with relish. It chewed and swallowed, only then answering.

"So you wonder how we're still alive," Mighty Archer mused. "You're not wrong to ask. The Queen of Summer could have splattered us all over the ground without even sweating. But only if we'd fought her dumb, Ivah. If we'd gone brawling. So we didn't."

The knife was pointed at the Firstborn, steel glinting under the fire's light.

"It's why your Sve Noc is screwed," the Mighty continued. "Your entire people, really. If some of you were solemn Above-fellators you might have a shot, but this is a villain scrap. You won't get a story for armour or a last moment save from some meddling Choir. This is about who's willing to do the darkest shit to win."

"I do not understand," Ivah admitted.

"It means our enemies down here are trying to fight fire with oil," the monster grinned, baring teeth. "Hells, I'm no gentle flower but the other two? We've got the Doom of Liesse and the woman that put her down on our roster. I pity the fuckers who try to escalate against *that*."

Ivah saw it then: flickering red, embers and flame. On the steel, on the eyes, on the ivory teeth. Scarlet like blood and ruin, a glimmer of what was to come.

"So don't you worry about damnation, Ivah," the Mighty Archer said. "Because there's a lot worse than that coming for the people in our way."

She bit into the meat with sharp teeth, juice flowing down her chin, and Ivah prostrated itself before leaving as quickly as it possibly could. It had found answers, and become all the more troubled for them. The Lord of Silent Steps dreamt again, that night, but it was not of the endless white plain. It remembered

terrible oaths spoken as it knelt in blood, drowning in an ocean of frost as its veins turned to ice and terrifying stillness claimed the world. And power, too, sister to that which it knew and yet so different. So *hungry*, a beast that could devour all of Creation and still covet more. Clarity still eluded it when it woke. And so Ivah sought the other creature that strode in the wake of the flood, the shade with scarlet eyes that burned so cold. It never slept, and in the early hours before most the sigil woke the Lord of Silent Steps found it waiting in the depths of the Crossroads. Beneath them Great Lotow was quiet, cowed.

Still quaking in the aftermath of the hour where the greatest sigil-holders of the city had been taken away without a trace.

The Mighty Shade was as a silhouette glimpsed in mist: transient, ephemeral and always treacherous. It sang of death to Ivah's senses, something ripped from the embrace of the grave and made to serve beyond it. Looking upon it was... difficult, now. Before it had been a shade of the dead given power and purpose, but since Ivah had taken oaths it sometimes saw beyond the façade. There were moments where it did not see scarlet eyes and scarlet robes but a corpse with rotting dark skin, a bloody wound where its heart should be. The urge to kneel in its presence was overwhelming, battering away at the Firstborn's mind. Ivah might be Mighty, but it was mightier still. The Lord of Silent Steps waited in silence, standing besides it.

"You may approach, Ivah," the Mighty Shade said.

It did so, and knelt with the appropriate demonstration of weakness.

"Speak."

"Great Mighty," Ivah said. "I would have guidance in matters of damnation."

It laughed, as if delighted, and the Lord of Silent Steps shivered. The sound was a caress on its soul, the fingers trailing having nails like knives.

"My very trade, once upon a time," the Mighty Shade mused. "This ought to prove amusing. Do continue."

"I stand estranged from the Night," Ivah said. "Without purpose understood. This perplexes me."

The shade smiled, for a flicker a corpse's ugly rictus before it became smooth flesh again.

"It is natural to feel adrift after finding a new mistress," the Mighty Shade said. "It is Ivah that fears what it does not

understand. You are no longer that person. Accepting this will grant you clarity."

The Firstborn was no fool, and so did not ask who it was now instead. Such questions had power, in both asking and answering, and it would not so easily grant it to the smiling death thing.

"Clever little drow," the Mighty Shade murmured. "She does have an eye for talent, doesn't she? You'll do quite nicely."

"Great Mighty," Ivah said. "I have sworn oaths and given service, but these things are not purpose. Fetters without sentence are senseless."

The shade's gaze burned scarlet, until it became sunken gold on desiccated skin. Ivah hid its disgust.

"So they are," the Mighty Shade said. "I will tell you, little drow, a story about two deaths."

The Lord of Silent Steps almost flinched.

"There was once a land of many kings and queens," the dead thing said. "They were proud and powerful, ruling over river, rock and sand. Many were their wonders, for they knew terrible secrets and flinched not at the cost of great works. For many years they warred, on each other and great realms abroad, and iron did sharpen iron."

The shade smiled dreamily.

"Then a storm shook the sea, and blew a single broken ship to their shores," the Mighty Shade said. "On it were strange and foolish men, lost and mad with thirst. These creatures were treated as curiosities, taught the tongues of the kingdoms and made to tell tales of their faraway home. They could have been snuffed out, my dear Ivah, as easy as snapping one's fingers."

The dead thing snapped its own, then laughed.

"They were spared, for they spoke of trade and wealth and fresh wonders brought to the kings and queens," the shade revealed. "And so another ship was built in a city of corals, and sent back."

The Mighty Shade fell silent.

"They returned, in time," the Mighty eventually said. "With many ships. Many men. And though they did bring wonders, they were wonders of war and great slaughter did come of it."

The dead thing leaned forward.

"And yet they could have been shattered like clay, Ivah," the shade whispered. "Had the kings and queens put aside their hatreds and seen what was to come. Instead they warred on each other still, thinking to use the strangers to settle their grudges. Cities fell, one after another, and when finally the doom was understood it was too late. The strange men clapped irons onto those once-proud rulers, for theirs was a war of chains."

The Mighty Shade shook itself, as if waking from a dream.

"This they called empire," the dead thing said. "They made a wasteland and called it peace, knowing not what they wrought. It would be many years, before the irons were broken. And even now their weight is felt, for inheritance is a manner of remembrance."

The Mighty looked upon Ivah, calm and depthless.

"Do you understand the meaning of this story, little drow?" it asked.

"The worthy take," the Lord of Silent Steps softly said. "The worthy rise."

"You reach the threshold of understanding," the Mighty Shade said. "Kind soul that I am, I will guide you across. The first death is in the story told. The second is in the story grasped. Purpose will follow."

"Many kingdoms died, in your words," Ivah said.

"One death," the shade said, "in many parts. There is reflection."

When understanding finally came, it was not gentle.

"Our ship came," the Lord of Silent Steps said. "Bearing three strangers."

"It's too late now, you poor creature," the dead thing murmured. "You invited us in. You would have purpose? It has already been granted to you."

Its smile was cold.

"Ours is the business of empire," the shade said. "And what a peace we will make, dearest Ivah. Oh, I think they will remember this one for a very long time."

"I am not estranged from the Night," the Firstborn croaked. "I make war against it."

"Tremble, ye Mighty, for a new age is upon you," the death thing laughed. "I was a slow learner in this, little drow, but I *have* learned. Iron is brittle. It breaks, no matter how sharp. So let us make something new instead, yes?"

Ivah's shoulder shook.

"Rise, Lord of Silent Steps," the shade ordered. "Our queen grows impatient. Today we take Lotow, and you have a role to play."

Night was beyond Ivah's reach, but the hunger was not.

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The bridge was broken.

It was an old break, unlike that which he had earlier passed. The bridges linking the Crossroads to the Column had shattered when the eldritch gate had devoured part of it, yet the lay of them could be tread if one was careful. Ivah had been, leaping across chasms with a lightness beyond mortal ken and landing without a sound. An entire floor of Great Lotow's heart had been whisked away, leaving the Column above it to fall. It had partly shattered under the impact, and remained angled. Apt to tumble down if force was exerted. No doubt the sigils at the bottom were living in terror of this happening, shivering in their holes as they hid from the precarious balance above. Ivah cared little, having passed like a ghost through the wreck before descending to heights untouched by the wreck. Down into the centre of the city, where the most powerful of the sigils dwelled. Three of them were without their sigil-holder, but one had refused to the call for council. Mighty Zarkan had demanded tithe and alliance against a rival for price of attendance, and been duly refused: the Queen of Lost and Found did not brook such bargains.

No doubt the Mighty had puffed with arrogance upon learning of the council's outcome, praising itself for its foresight in avoiding doom. Had. For another gate had been wrought this morning, and it had been a sharp lesson. The Zarkan Sigil held three districts, Ivah had been told, that had once been the residences of the wealthy and powerful of Great Lotow. These districts would have been raised with wells and gardens, making them worthy prizes to take and hold. Ivah now stood before the largest of the three, and looked upon the wreckage with calm eye. The traces of Losara Queen's working could still be seen in the deep gouges around the mouth of the district where the edges of the gate had cut. The territory of Mighty Zarkan had been sealed shut for exactly the quarter of an hour. From the outside, anyway. The gate had spewed out a flood of icy waters that tore through the district mercilessly, drowning or crushing the slow and smashing houses and temples alike as if they were kindling. Corpses could still be seen among the rubble on the other side of the broken bridge, left to waft Night without harvesting.

The Zarkan were too terrified of a repeat to risk coming out of the highest places of their territory.

Ivah waited, standing in the open. They would see it, and come to bargain. It was not long before Mighty Zarkan made its way to the other half of the bridge, and the Firstborn studied it curiously. It was tall and proud, strong in Night and little marked by the killings that would have seen it rise. In the air, Ivah tasted fear. It wondered if it should feel kinship for this one, some sense of belonging that would stand against the oaths and purpose it had taken. And yet all it found was contempt. What a petty creature Zarkan was, shrouded in terror even as it painted courage over its face. Blind, lost, humbled by forces beyond its understanding. Did it regret now the demands it had made? No, Ivah thought, it would not. That was not the way of the Mighty. The worthy took, the worthy rose. The only sin was death, for death was failure, and Zarkan still lived. What was there to regret? *And when finally the doom was understood, it was too late.* The Firstborn would squabble themselves into nothingness. The nerezim would slaughter them with wonders of war, or they would be broken into Losara Queen's service. Grief was due, it thought, but it did not come. Ivah had slain many in its time, harvested their worth and made it its own. It had not grieved then, had it?

"And now we do the same," the Lord of Silent Steps murmured, "to the Everdark itself."

Mighty Zarkan struck the foot of its spear against stone, demanding attention as soon as it arrived.

"Mighty Ivah," the sigil-holder said. "Rylleh to cattle. Speak your fill."

Ivah hummed, cocked its head to the side.

"Lord," it corrected, feeling out the foreign word. "Lord Ivah."

The other Firstborn spat into the deeps.

"You wear meaningless words for your sigil," Zarkan said. "Shame on you."

"What would happen," the Lord of Silent Steps said, "if the gate was kept for a full hours?"

Mighty Zarkan stilled.

"Would you drown, Zarkan?" Ivah smiled. "No matter. When the gate finally closes, you will stand utterly alone. A sigil of one. What a sight that would be."

"Losara is weak," the Mighty said. "It could barely slay Urulan."

"Is the first among your rylleh in this district?" Ivah asked.

"Are you threatening me?" Zarkan hissed.

"No, then," Ivah mused. "Good, it will simplify matters."

Without another word, it turned and began to walk away.

"Wait," Mighty Zarkan called out. "What do you want?"

Ivah turned. Fear was beginning to peek out from under the mask. How easily people came undone.

"Everything, Zarkan," it said. "We want everything. And you will give it to us, because otherwise you will die."

"I won't take oaths," the Mighty insisted.

"*Then you will die,*" Ivah barked, fury taking hold of it. "Eldest Night, do you not see? We have *nothing* to bargain with. You can tell yourself this is only a single city, that the further cabals will break the thrust, but you are missing the point. This is not war, it never was. It is grave robbing and we lost before they ever set foot here. You think Sve Noc will raise a finger to end this? *They are following our rules.* Giving us what we want, every step of the way."

He laughed and the sound of it was brittle.

"I care not if you take the oaths, Zarkan," Ivah said. "It changes nothing. Someone filled with your Night will do so in your stead after you are slain. They cannot lose, because there are no stakes for them. They can only gain."

The Firstborn shook its head.

"We can only gain," Ivah corrected softly. "For if the only sin is death, mine is the business of empire."

"You speak madness," Mighty Zarkan said, face gone pale.

"Peace," the Lord of Silent Steps said. "I speak of peace, Zarkan."

Peregrine I

*"Of all Choirs, beware of Mercy
The hand so patient and kindly
Of any sacrament, it is the last
And ever the most harshly cast."*

– Extract from the 'Hymn of Hymns', Atalantian sacred text
(declared heresy in Procer and Callow)

Levante had swelled thick with death, birthing an unending parade of horrors.

For six months now the red plague had tormented the city, spreading through every nook and cranny. It took the young and the old, rode those it did not kill only to rise again the moment it was believed to have been ended. There had been rumours it was an Ashuran ship that first brought it to the capital, though that kind of talk was harshly stamped out by what remained of the city guard. The Dominion was too deeply in the debt of the Thalassocracy to be able to afford the squabble that would come of such an accusation. Debts of gold, debts of protection, debts of knowledge – some days it felt like the true rulers of Levant lived across the sea, assembled in some hidden committee. Tariq Isbili was too deeply exhausted to resent the Ashurans for it, and what little disgust he had left he reserved for his own kin. Even as the people of Levante died in droves the old city had remained closed, healers obsessively scrutinizing even the bushels of wheat that passed the walls. Yet his Honoured Mother, the Holy Seljun of Levant, was no fool. She knew it would look ill for the Blood of the Pilgrim to remain hidden in such dire time, and so she had chosen some of her issue to venture into the jaws of death. There had been five children to the Honoured Mother, when the decision made.

Three now remained, Tariq second eldest among them. His elder sister Yasa, as Honoured Daughter and heiress presumptive, had been spared. So had his distinguished younger brother Bakri, as his exploits in the Brocelian Forest brought much-needed luster to the Blood. Tariq himself had been commanded to remain, but left without reply out of sheer contempt for the order. Of all his siblings he was the only one to have learned sacraments and the lesser ways of healing. Honoured Mother, he knew, wished to preserve him in the hope he would one day join the ranks of the Lanterns and provide useful ties to their lodges. A petty desire. Tariq would not hide behind tall walls when his people were dying like animals mere street corners away. Five months had passed, since that rebellion, and over their span the stench and wailing of the dying had become as old friends. He had gone from charnel yard to charnel yard, wielding cleansing Light until his vision swam and his hands trembled. The other healers had handled him with care, at first, trying to keep him away from the worst of it. He'd ignored their attempts and headed where the plague struck hardest, and as the weeks passed the attempts became rarer and rarer until they ended entirely.

They looked to him for instructions, now, for most the men and women who had given these had since died to the sickness. His two younger brothers had been lost as well, even if they'd been relegated to safer duties like commanding the city guard and overseeing the city's quarantine. Idhari has survived a riot of the plague-ridden only to take sick himself, and after the plague sunk deep into him no amount of Light was enough to save his life. Tariq himself had nearly died pouring all he could in his brother's feverish body, weeping as he held his Idhari's corpse. *Just a boy*, he'd thought. *He was just a boy*. Sanja had escaped the red plague but not the knife. As overseer of the quarantine he'd been taking bribes in exchange for allowing wealthy individuals to flee the city. Word of it had reached their Honoured Mother, and secret decree come down. Sanja had 'heroically died' attempting to prevent his greedy right hand from breaking quarantine in exchange for bribes, slain when he confronted the desperate man. Those who knew better would hold their tongues, for one did not lightly lay accusations as the feet of the Grey Pilgrim's own bloodline. Tariq dug the grave himself and wept for the man his brother could have become, if not for the one he had turned out to be.

But he had wiped away the tears, and returned to his duty. Wading in a sea of death, putting out the last embers of the disease. Six months from the first known red death, and finally the calamity came to an end. The healers kept vigil another fortnight, for they had been fooled before, but no flare followed. Tariq walked through empty streets, a ghost among a city of ghosts, and nearly retched at the lingering scent of the pyres. His silver robes, the privilege of holiest of bloodlines, had darkened with grime and ash. He felt like a carrion bird looking upon the corpse of a once thriving city, some wicked omen of death. Eventually his steps took him to the docks, and there he stood in the sea breeze watching an Ashuran trading ship make shore. Disaster had passed, he thought, and now their allies to east returned. First the merchants, to look upon the destruction, but soon enough some committee would send envoys. Quiet offers of loans and restitutions would be made. The world would keep on spinning like nothing had happened at all. He was still watching when they found him. Armed guard, their breastplates inlaid with silver: the Holy Seljun' own guard.

"Honoured Son," the sole captain among them said. "You are recalled to the old city. The gates have been opened."

Honoured Son. An angry shiver went down his spine at the words. He knew very well the meaning of them and his wrath only grew for it. Tariq mastered the sentiment, for these guards did not deserve his anger. They were only messengers. He followed them in silence, until his threadbare sandals were treading the palace grounds. He was ushered into a cleansing room, large bowls of lukewarm water awaiting for him to clean himself up. Yasa awaited

him there, her young face unreadable. *We are all children*, he thought. His only sister eldest among them, and barely twenty. She wore the long ornate braid of a woman married, though it did not suit her features. The custom was half-abandoned, nowadays, but Yasa was not one to abandon tradition for the sake of vanity.

"Honoured Brother," she said, her smile rueful.

Tariq strode forward to wash his hands clean of grime, and only after shook his head.

"Honoured Sister," he replied, denying it.

"There is no point in fighting it, Tariq," his sister said. "The entire city sings your praises, and Mother prizes reputation most of all."

"She sent us to die, Yasa," he replied quietly. "Sanja's end was of his own making, perhaps, but Idhari? Gods, Idhari..."

His voice broke.

"You were not there to see him pass," Tariq whispered. "A shadow of himself. Terrified, his mind wandering. I do not care what she wants."

Yasa's hands were shaking, he saw. She'd been closer to him than any of them.

"Honour to the Blood," she got out. "Though unworthy of Bestowal, he passed a true heir to the Grey Pilgrim."

"Fuck the Blood," Tariq hissed. "They were our brothers, Yasa, and she threw them away for what – appearances? Neither was ready for the duty. It should have been us from the start."

"You cannot speak like that anymore, little brother," she cautioned. "Honoured Mother has expressed her intent to name you custodian of the rolls."

He almost spat. The rolls were almost as holy as the Book of All Things itself, in Levant. The sprawling genealogies of the Bestowed, beginning with the founding heroes of the Dominion. It had since grown to encompass the bloodlines and issue of every Bestowed in the history of their nation, all tracked along with great deeds across the myriad pages. To keep the rolls was the duty of the Holy Seljun, but the granting of custody over them was now often used to informally name an heir.

"You have prepared to rule your entire life, Yasa," he said. "This is not only unjust, it is absurd. I have not the learning nor the inclination."

"It'll be all right, Tariq," his sister reassured him. "I will stay at your side. We are not Arlesites, to sunder kinship over titles."

He looked at Yasa's face, then, the hurt in her eyes she was setting aside for the sake of their people. The unflattering braid serving as reminder of the marriage she had embraced early to ensure the Blood would have lawful issue while her young brothers – even Tariq himself, as it now shamed him to admit – had spent their nights enjoying the attention that came from belonging to the holiest bloodline of the Dominion. While he escaped the old city to confer with priests and philosophers, to laugh with wandering poets and drink with sailors, his sister had studied the classics. Learned the intricate ways of trade, forged ties with the heiresses and lords of the ancient lines of Blood that now ruled over Levant. A lifetime of steadfast labour, and now she was to be robbed of her due because he had gained some acclaim. *Because her marriage bed has not borne fruit*, he suspected as well. Tariq wiped his hands clean and knelt at his sister's feet.

"You cannot," she whispered. "You can't kneel to me anymore. To anyone but Mother. I know you mean well."

Gently, he kissed her brow.

"Rule well, Yasa," he said.

Her eyes flickered with confusion.

"Brother –"

"Am I not of the Pilgrim's own blood?" Tariq smiled. "Who could deny my right to a pilgrimage of my own?"

"Tariq, she would be *furious*," Yasa urgently said. "She's already approached the Majilis for confirmation, if you leave she'll be humiliated in front of every great bloodline in Levant. She might actually strike you from the rolls."

From Tariq Isbili to simply Tariq, he thought. It stung that he could be denied his heritage in the eyes of all the Dominion, but it was not too great a price to pay for this. He met his sister's eyes squarely.

"You will be better," he said. "You have to be, for all of us."

He kissed Yasa's brow once more and rose to his feet. Tariq Isbili walked out of the old city, then of Levante itself, and kept walking. Before a sennight had passed the Holy Seljun of Levant had cast him out of the Grey Pilgrim's line in the eyes of Gods and men. Within the year, there was not a single written mention of him left in the entire Dominion.

Tariq was eighteen years old.

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“Healer, you do me dishonour,” the man insisted.

Tariq shook his head, smiling to take away the sting of it, and refused to close his fingers around the handful of silver coins. He pressed them back into the older man’s palm.

“I have taken vow of poverty,” Tariq lied. “I cannot, my friend. That you have provided me with roof and meal is already more than enough.”

The man – Olivar, his name was – hesitated but did not press any further. Such vows were rare among mere healers, but common among those who would seek admission into the Lanterns. The warrior-priests of Levant disdained all earthly possessions save glory itself, and none could enter their ranks without discarding all riches. Truth be told, Tariq could have used the silver. What little food he had left in his satchel was growing stale, and it would be a long walk to Alava. The hills were treacherous, especially at night, and full of prowling creatures of which wolves were the least dangerous. The village he’d stumbled into three days ago was too small to warrant mention on any map he’d ever seen, barely three hundred souls, but it was close to the most common path into the crags. Tariq had hoped to hitch a ride on a trader’s cart, but none had passed through. Without coin to offer the chances were slim any would accept him even if one did come, he knew, but he could not find it in him to take what was likely the only coins the older man possessed. If there was a lean month, come winter, they could make the difference between survival and starvation. Still, he could not linger here any longer. He had helped those he could, it was time to move on.

“Your mother must not exert herself for a full moon’s turn,” he reminded Olivar. “The Light can only do so much to ease the passage of time, and if she returns to the fields her joints will swell anew.”

“I will do what I can,” the man promised with a grimace.

“Would you not avail yourself of our hospitality one more night, healer?” another voice suggested.

Tariq cleared his throat awkwardly, eyes moving against his will to take in the shapely silhouette of his host’s daughter. Dalevi. Lovely as a summer night, and the invitation in her dark eyes had only grown more pointed the longer he remained here. It would have been dishonourable, for him to lie with Olivar’s daughter while staying under his roof. Very dishonourable, no matter what the Hidden Poets famously implied about lively Alavan girls in their more suggestive works. He’d mastered himself so far, but

Tariq was no saint and the temptation was beginning to strain his principles. Especially when she smiled as slyly as she now did.

"Alas," he croaked out. "I cannot delay any longer."

She pouted rather distractingly, and it was a relief when her father spoke up.

"I know you are headed north on pilgrimage, healer," Olivar said. "But it might be best for you to go around the hills and take the eastern path. There have been rumours of a creature attacking villages."

Tariq's eyes narrowed.

"Not bandits?" he asked.

Alavans had resisted the Proceran occupation most stubbornly, it was said, preferring to burn their own city and flee into the hills rather than live in their own homes under foreign yoke. But the habits of those years had not been entirely discarded after the liberation, many of them turning to banditry or the kind of mercenary work that was essentially that. The many lines of the Champion's Blood had made a point of never stamping it out entirely, preferring to use the persisting peril as crucible for their young instead. Olivar shook his head.

"Some say it is a chimera, but every old fool this side of the Brocelian will blame trouble on chimeras," the man scathingly said. "Some old barrow spirit gone mad, I'd say."

Tariq grimaced. The restless things born of defiled sacred grounds were no implacable threat, but they were near-impossible to kill through mundane means. Perhaps the Light might put one to flight but it might also kill it and the notion of hurting a spirit cursed through no act of its own sat ill with him.

"I will be careful," he promised. "And thank you for the advice."

He made his farewells promptly, doing his best to ignore Olivar's hard stare when lovely Dalevi lingered a little too close to whisper into his ear the kind of reception she'd grant him should he return, and escaped without shaming himself. He made good pace, sleeping under the stars when it grew too dark to continue, and found his way unhindered until the fourth afternoon. He saw the horses before he saw the warriors, tied to trees near a neatly-made camp. It was empty when he came upon it a little off the road, but there was no need to wonder where the occupants had gone: in the distance bellows and laughter sounded, interrupted by reptilian screams. It was not his business, Tariq knew. It would be wisest to press on. Yet he found his feet taking him towards the commotion anyway. Sliding clumsily off a rocky slope, he came across a mere half dozen young warriors in well-forged

mail. They were loosely surrounding a creature, Tariq saw. A great winged lizard of dusty-coloured scales, with a long stinger-tipped tail trailing behind it. *Wyvern*, he thought. One of the warriors had put a spear through its left wing, he saw, and so it could not flee. They were exhausting the creature with harassment before going in for the kill. The sound of his descent was enough to alert one of the armoured youths.

"Close enough, stranger," a dark-haired woman called out. "The hunt has been claimed."

A sword was casually pointed in his direction, and to Tariq raised his palms in appeasement. Slowly he took off his satchel bag, dropping it to the ground.

"I mean no insult," he said. "I was drawn by the screams."

"Get him out of here, Sintra," another youth called out, darting forward to threaten the wyvern with a raised spear before retreating when it struck out. "We don't want unknowns in the middle of this."

The dark-haired woman – Sintra, it seemed – left the ring as another warrior smoothly closed the gap. Two long tresses flowed down her back through an opening in her helm, swinging as she moved closer. The sword was not sheathed, but at least she ceased pointing it at him.

"Consider your curiosity sated, traveller," she said. "This is dangerous work, and would be made more dangerous still by a watcher."

Tariq cheerfully ignored the implied warning and order to walk away.

"Would this be the creature that has been troubling villages, then?" he asked.

Sintra looked amused.

"A well-informed traveller, I see," she said. "Though not so learned as to recognize the symbols on my tabard."

Tariq's eyes dipped to the jerkin in question, finding it marked with red lion cradling a sword. He took in a sharp breath.

"Sintra *Marave*," he said. "Of the Champion's Blood."

She had to be of the main line, to bear the heraldry, though where in it she fit he had no real notion. Yasa had been the one to rub elbows with such hallowed personages when the Majilis was convened, not him.

"Of some Blood yourself, to recognize it so swiftly," Sintra noted with a raised eyebrow. "You do not have the looks of an Alavan. Your name?"

"Unimportant," Tariq replied. "Have you learned why the wyvern attacked villages? They usually avoid such places."

"Unimportant," Sintra echoed. "It slew some and wounded many. A hunt is warranted."

"You would kill in ignorance?" he replied, genuinely surprised. "Its eggs could have been stolen. They sell for a fortune."

The creatures tended to take sick in other lands, but the eggs themselves were a delicacy. And it was said in Levante that the faraway Praesi would pay a king's ransom for one unbroken, though that kind of trade was frowned upon.

"It has killed children of the Heavens," Sintra said. "I know all I need to."

"There is no honour in this," Tariq insisted.

Their conversation was interrupted by a pained cry. One of the youths had struck the wyvern's muzzle and drawn blood, retreating behind his shield as the winged lizard struck out with its stinger.

"There is honour in the very act of slaying," Sintra flatly replied. "What business is this of yours, stranger of no name?"

She was not wrong, he thought. Hunts such as this were commonplace in all of Levant, and often with weaker reason than this. Those that wandered into the Brocelian to seek glory at the end of a blade could not claim to be avenging anything. Yet Tariq looked at the creature, the pierced wing clutched around its body, the dark blood dripping down on the earth, and he felt restless. Perhaps if it had been cleaner he could have made his peace with it, but there was something wrong about... this. It reminded him of children tormenting a cat.

"I dislike," Tariq eventually said, "unnecessary suffering."

"This is no land for the faint of heart," Sintra replied, a hint of contempt in her tone.

"Let me try," someone said, and to Tariq's surprise the fool had the same voice as him.

Oh, he realized. It *had* been him. Fool and speaker both. The dark-haired woman stared at him in surprise, then laughed.

"You?" she said. "You do not even have a blade. It'll gobble you in a moment."

"Then you may use my death as a distraction," Tariq drily replied.

Sintra eyed him anew, this time without the contempt.

"No coward, at least," she said. "And it might save us an hour."

She turned towards the others, raising her voice.

"Our friend wants to have a turn at it," Sintra called out. "Make room in the ring."

The youth who'd spoken earlier turned in surprise, backing away from the wyvern.

"You can't be serious," he said. "Sintra-"

"You are not so grown I cannot put you over my knee, Ishaq," she interrupted flatly. "Move."

They others obeyed without backtalk, after that, and slowly the ring parted to allow for passage. Sintra glanced at him expectantly and Tariq wondered if it was too late to change his mind. Not even six months away from Levante and he was already going to get himself killed. Bakri was right, he should have petitioned the Hidden Poets to join their ranks. His verses were no treasure, but it would hardly be the first time one of the Pilgrim's line crawled into a sinecure and disappeared from the writ of history. Tariq warily advanced until he'd passed the ring, and slowed when the wyvern turned its bloodshot eyes on him. The stinger rose fluidly, of a height with his head.

"Easy now," he said, raising his palms to show he bore no arms.

Carefully, he took a step forward.

"I mean no harm," Tariq said. "Are you hurt, old one? I am a healer."

The stinger drew back and he stopped.

"No harm," Tariq repeated in a soothing tone.

The stinger drooped, and he took a step forward. The wyvern struck without warning, but he threw himself into a roll and the stinger missed him by mere inches. Behind him he could hear Sintra ordering her warriors to hold, but he had no time to spare for it. He called on the Light, let the gentle glow fill him, and shaped a simple wreath of it around his hand.

"I am here to help," he said, and the stinger stopped an inch away from his forehead.

The wyvern stared at the Light, as if hypnotized, and let out a plaintive scream. Tariq laid a light hand on the tail and nudged it aside, advancing carefully with the Light ahead of him. Another four steps and suddenly the creature was on him, enfolding him inside its wings, and he was faced with rows of dagger-like teeth. He breathed out, ignoring his heartbeat going wild. Fear would only get him killed. Too-clever eyes considered him, and the wyvern let out another cry. It made his ears ring but he worked through it.

"You're hurt," Tariq quietly said. "Show me where."

It sniffed, but then it lowered its head. It was easy enough to find the wound: right behind the crest there was an almost hand-sized thorn biting into the soft space between scales and flesh. The young healer touched it and the wyvern screamed. He withdrew his hand, studying the thorn instead. The flesh around it had begun to rot, turning black, and even the closest scales were falling out. No, not rot. This was poison, corrupting the flesh.

"This is from a barrow-tree, isn't it?" he said. "That which is rooted in the grave bears its fruits."

The wyvern did not reply, patiently waiting with its head lowered. Tariq had studied healing, though not as deeply as one who intended to make it their vocation would, and he knew there was no brew or spell that would cure such a wound. Not certainly, anyway: no two barrow-trees were the same, as no two barrows were. Some caused violent madness if the bark was partaken of, others a deathlike sleep should the fruits be eaten and the leaves of others were said to preserve flesh from the ravages of time, if made into paste and applied, though at the cost of a deathly pallor. This one had borne poisonous thorns, it seemed, and the wyvern been imprudent enough to be stung. Perhaps it'd been lured by the prospect of eating a barrow spirit. Legends said great wisdom could be gained from such a thing, fanciful tales of creatures growing into dragons from the consumption abounding. He suspected, regardless, that it was the pain of the spreading poison that had driven it to attack villages. Tariq pressed his hand slightly to the side of the wound, pouring Light into the flesh. The poison was thinned, though not entirely dispersed, and the flesh purged the rot some. What was left behind still looked sickly but the wyvern let out a soft cry of relief. The pain was, for now, being kept at bay. This time when Tariq's fingers closed around the thorn the wyvern did not protest. The Light was calming it, almost putting into a daze.

"I am sorry, old one," he murmured. "I cannot cure you. The poison will have spread into your blood by now, the pain will resume as soon as the Light ends."

He breathed out raggedly.

"Peace to you, my friend," Tariq sadly said, and suddenly pushed the thorn all the way into its brain.

The wyvern screamed, wings batting wildly, but the poison was a violent one. It drew back, trashing around, and after a mere ten heartbeats it fell over dead. He'd been thrown to the ground and his arm was likely strained, but he rose to his feet. Kneeling before the wyvern's head, he gently closed its eyes. A shadow was cast on him, Sintra standing by his side.

"I thought you were going to heal it," she said.

He felt it then. The answer this begged. Like a whisper in his ear, a comforting hand on his back. The first step on a journey he did not yet understand.

"I could not," Tariq said. "And I dislike unnecessary suffering."

Peregrine II

"Peace is not a right, it is the privilege of those who have toiled to break the back of war."

– King Albert Fairfax of Callow, the Thrice-Invaded

"You were gone for long, this time," she said.

A few years ago Tariq's pride might have been mildly stung by the fact that she could return to casual conversation so swiftly after an hour of rather delightful exertion in bed, but these days he knew better. His head fell back against the pillow, though he twisted around after to better be able to run a hand down the bare flank of his lover. She bit her lip at the sensation, to his pleasure, to her gaze turned amused when she caught his eyes lingering on the generous curve of her breasts.

"You will not distract me so easily," Sintra Marave warned him. "I have learned of your wiles, Tariq of No Import."

His name she spoke with a teasing lilt, as it had become something of a jest between them. It had become clear rather early on that his attempts at hiding his identity had been seen through near immediately: Sintra, he'd learned, regularly corresponded with his sister. From their first meeting she had suspected him. There were, he supposed, only so many haggard young men named Tariq wandering the countryside of Levant.

"I surrender before your keen insight, then," Tariq grinned.

He did know better, now. Better than to think this was casual conversation at all, or that its initiation so soon after their pleasure-taking was slight to bedplay itself. Sintra would not

still leave her balcony door unlocked whenever he returned to Alava was she displeased with their time together.

"So keen that I discern you travelled to the Free Cities," the heiress to the Champion's Blood said.

"Stygia," he freely admitted. "Never before had I seen such a horrifying pit of human misery, and I walked the streets of Levante during the plague."

"Famously," Sintra drily said. "What took you to that nest of slavers?"

She shifted around in their bed – arrogance on his part, to think of it as that, and yet he could not help it – and rested her chin on her palm. While that did interesting things to the parts of her beneath said chin, Tariq valiantly maintained his concentration.

"There was a delegation headed to Arwad by ship," he said. "One of their slaver ships struck it on the way there – by mistake, I believe, even Stygians are not usually so bold – and took captives before sinking it."

Sintra's brow rose.

"Junla Osená?" she said, surprised. "That was *you*?"

"I followed the trail back to Stygia," Tariq said. "Though I did not know anything of the ship save that it was Levantine when I came across it."

His lover snorted out a laugh, her sweat-soaked and somewhat dishevelled braids swinging as she did.

"Only you," Sintra fondly said, "would end up rescuing the third in line for Tartessos by accident. You do know she's publicly broken her betrothal?"

The healer grimaced, rather embarrassed.

"I had heard," he said, chagrined. "I did not mean to convey interest where there is none."

Sintra chuckled, and for a moment he admired the ripple of the muscle in her arms. No frail poet, his lover. Warrior to the bone, born for the fight. Unlike the Lady Junla.

"Worried I'll get jealous?" she teased.

Tariq sighed.

"Could you not be, at least a little?" he half-complained.

She smiled, but it was brittle.

"You know I cannot wed you," Sintra said. "It would be-"

"- taken as a challenge to Yasa, I know," he softly finished.

The heiress to Alava, trading promises with a man who'd once been proposed heir to the Tattered Throne? Regardless of the truth it would be seen as a war of succession in the making, the Champion's Blood attempting to put a puppet of the Pilgrim's Blood in power. The Dominion would split apart at the seams, lords and ladies taking up steel to place crown their favourite. Their fingers threaded, without him ever needing to think of it, and he glanced down at the sheets. Tariq had not taken another lover since the night she'd first smiled at him and mentioned her balcony wall could easily be scaled. Love was a word they had avoided, though it roared loud in their forced silences.

"You could come with me," he said, not looking up.

Fingers caressed his cheek, surprisingly gentle for the roughness of the skin.

"You know I cannot," Sintra repeated.

"You would not be the first Marave to prize adventure over the high seat," he pointed out, and immediately felt guilty for it.

It was been ill-said, that. To ask her to leave her life, her rights behind her simply to be with him. How easy it was to speak of sacrifice, when you were not the one making it. A comforting hand fell on his shoulder. It was not Sintra's, or any mortal's. The fingers on his cheek feel and an apology was halfway out his lips when she tucked up his chin, dark eyes meeting his.

"If you were just a man, we'd be hunting chimeras in the Brocelian and sleeping in brambles under moonlight," Sintra solemnly said. "Never believe otherwise. But you are not that, love. I called your rescue in Stygia an accident, but we both know it wasn't that."

Tariq's lips tightened.

"I am a healer," he insisted.

"When the levies broke in Malaga, you held back the sea for near an hour," Sintra gently said. "There are some who still swear you cradled a star in your hands. A healer, perhaps, but also more than that."

A Pilgrim, she did not say. The Grey Pilgrim. No matter the colour of the robes Tariq wore, dust always turned them grey. The whispers had told him that denial would change nothing. He might have hated them, had they not always taken him where he could do

so much *good*. It was still bitter brew to swallow that he would have to do it alone. He dropped back onto the pillow, tired in more than body. They remained like that for a long time, the sounds of Alava at night sneaking in through the balcony door they'd been too preoccupied to properly close. He'd come to think of the city more as a home than Levante ever had been. Tariq had been a boy, back in the Old City. It was in Alava he had learned to truly leave that behind. *Let them bury me here, when Above calls me home*, he thought. *In the shade of the pear trees beneath the balcony*. A morbid thought, and he chased it away with softer words shared with Sintra. They half-fell asleep, after, but he woke before long. The whispers were back. East, he thought. They wanted him to head east. He clenched his fist and forced his eyes to close, though sleep did not return.

"They're calling again, aren't they?" Sintra suddenly whispered.

Her voice was still hoarse with sleep. He turned to kiss her brow.

"They can wait," he whispered back.

It had been a long five months without seeing her. The Ophanim could hold their tongues until dawn, at least. Sintra rose, the sheets falling off of her torso, and smiled.

"Go," she said.

"Sintra-" he started.

"Go," she interrupted. "Honour your Blood, Tariq."

He clenched his teeth.

"You will have a bed here, when you return," Sintra said, then caught him by the nape of the neck and brought him into a bruising kiss.

The parted too soon, both panting.

"And you *will* return," Sintra ordered. "That much I claim from you, by right of conquest. If the Choir of Mercy takes issue, let them try the might of the Champion's Blood."

The Ophanim murmured approvingly, to his mild distress.

"Conquest?" he croaked out.

She grinned.

"Do you truly think *you* were the pursuer in this, Tariq of No Import?"

Tariq was thirty one years old, when his mother died.

It had been thirteen years since he had last set foot in the city of Levante, and in truth it was unwise for him to return even now. His sister Yasa would not formally ascend to the Tattered Throne until the funerary games of the departed Seljun of Levant were ended, and in a way his presence here could still be taken as a challenge to her rights. He'd been prepared to linger on the outskirts of the region until the games had ended, but Yasa had written – he could almost hear the very mild tone she'd used when they were children and she thought he was being a fool – that she would send the army to drag him into the city tied like a hog if he did not come by himself. *She robbed year from us, brother, with her fecklessness. I will not grant her a single day more.* And so Tariq slipped back into the city where he'd been raised under cover of night, dark cloak covering the grey robes he had grown weary of fighting against. The city guards did not look twice, for the city was swelling fit to burst with those come to pay their last respects, and after passing the walls he let his feet guide him.

How easy it was to return to the old city, as if more than a decade had not passed. This was not home, had not been a in a long time, but it would have been a lie to say there was no fondness to be found. Tariq came across his first silver breastplate ten blocks away from the entrance to the palace, and nodded with approval at the vigilance. It did little to stop him from entering unseen, though. He'd walked paths more dire than this. Salia, where all of Levant were looked upon with suspicion, Mercantis as a wanted man and even Thalassina, where the slightest sign of Bestowal was a mark of death. He brushed his hands against the old wards the Grim Binder had put into place at the behest of her comrade the first Grey Pilgrim, feeling them part for him almost eagerly. There were few places in Levant who were not friend to what he'd inherited from his distant ancestor. He strode into the depths of the palace fleetfoot and unseen, letting chance guide him. It tended to favour him. Surprised flicked across his face when he found himself by his mother's old bureau, candelight and magefire shining under the door. Tariq touched his lips, whispered *open* and touched the lock. Light glimmered over steel, and easy as that it was done.

He entered quietly, finding his only sister sitting at the broad oaken desk and methodically going through correspondence. Half-moon spectacles – of Ashuran make, he noted – rested loosely against her nose as she frowned downwards in thought. Tariq leaned against the doorway for a moment, taking in the sight of Yasa Isbili for the first time in thirteen years. They had traded letters, whenever they could be snuck in, but anything more would have been too risky. Her face had grown thicker, he thought. It suited her well, he thought, made her long braid seems less like some strange tail sprouting from the back of her head. There were

lines on her face where there had once been none, but she seemed... vibrant. Like she'd finally reached where she had always been meant to stand. *You have, Yasa, he thought. And they will remember you as the greatest Seljun we've had in centuries.* Smiling, Tariq cleared his throat. She nearly jumped out of her skin, but her eyes widened when she took him in.

"Tariq," she said, almost awed. "How did you- no, it doesn't matter."

She rose to her feet, pushing back her chair, and their strides met halfway. The siblings held each other close for a very long time, content to simply enjoy the luxury so long denied them. Yasa withdrew first, eyes misty. His were as well, and he clutched her forearm tight.

"Honoured Sister," he smiled.

"None of that," she replied, shaking her head. "Not from you, Tariq. Never from you."

"I must," the healer reminded her. "And I will kneel as well, come the games."

"You're the Grey Pilgrim, you idiot," she snorted. "You don't kneel to anyone."

"To you, yes," Tariq firmly maintained. "Until the message sinks in."

She brushed back her braid.

"We can argue about that tomorrow," she said ruefully. "I'm too glad to see you to muster proper indignation."

"And up late, I see," Tariq said. "Preparing still?"

"*That*, at least, is over with," Yasa grimly replied. "Letters from abroad are a relief, truth be told. News about so far away are more diversion than duty."

The healer nodded knowingly.

"The Praesi civil war?" he guessed.

"When are they not?" she shrugged. "The committees in Ashur are betting the rebel calling himself Nefarious will win, though it shouldn't affect trade. They say he has Callowan ambitions."

"When do they not?" Tariq shrugged, a smile tugging at his lips.

Gods, it was still so easy to speak with her. As if they had never parted. The healer had never put as much stock in the Blood as most his people, but perhaps there was some truth to it. There

was something running through his sister's veins that was kin to him, and it was more than just red water. They sat, after that, together in that bureau they'd both been forbidden to enter as children. They traded stories of his travels for hers of the city and their family, hours passing by until dawn came. Tariq noted the dark circles around Yasa's eyes with some guilt.

"May I?" he said, offering his hand.

"Yes?" she said, bemused.

The Light wreathed his hand, a small glimmer, and poured into her body. The rings disappeared, chasing away the tiredness, but Tariq's eyes opened wide.

"Brother?" Yasa asked.

A broad grin split his face.

"You're pregnant," he said. "A boy."

She let out a noise of shock at the sudden announcement, before relief and delight claimed her face. After all these years of trying, finally the Heavens had blessed her. Tariq was going to have a nephew and there was not a single thing in Creation that could spoil this day.

—

On the last day of the funerary games, the Grey Pilgrim knelt before his sister in front of every lord and lady in the Dominion of Levant.

When whispers began spread, he stared at them cold-eyed until there was not a damned sound in the room.

—

A fervour swept across the Dominion, after Yasa Isbili sat the Tattered Throne. For the first time since anyone could remember, there was more to the Majilis than bickering and backbiting. The Seljun was still young, the people said, and she had the fire in her belly that had driven the Pilgrim's Blood to first wrest a nation out of the hands of the Principate. After every journey Tariq undertook, he passed through taverns and inns and let the rumours wash over him with a smile. *The levies at Malaga were raised back properly*, the people said. *About time, and every great Blood put coin to it.* To the Brocelian he went, guiding the Lanterns to purge a barrow-curse gone wild. *The old rebel road is being paved anew, from Levante to Vaccei*, the people said. *The Majilis said they'll raise waystations as well.* To Nicae he went, scaring off the Shadow-eater long enough for the Thieftaker to

learn his true face. *They're founding a school in Levante, the people said. Ashuran scholars will come teach.*

Tariq came and went, and every time he returned his people were thriving a little more. It was as if the savage need for doing better Yasa had felt since they were children had trickled down to every last soul in Levante. Wildlands were being claimed, walls raised around towns and beasts driven away. Fields were tilled, mines dug and for the first time since he could remember he could see pride in the back of those calling themselves Levantines. Not an Ashuran protectorate, not Procer's rebel principalities – it was as if the entire Dominion had woken up from a long slumber, finally remembering the defiant spirit that had seen it become a nation at all.

"I knew," he told Sintra, three years after the coronation. "I always knew that she was born for this."

His lover idly slapped his chest, though from the lack of bite to it she appeared to be amused.

"Are you really going to boast about Yasa being a fine Seljun even while we're in bed?" she complained.

"My apologies, Lady Sintra," Tariq grinned.

Her father had passed the high seat onto her last year, after finding the pain in his joints made it hard to hold his axe. The Ophanim had been merciful enough no whispers had come when they Lord of Alava had held his final feast before putting on his finest arms and armour, mounting his horse and riding into Brocelian Forest to kill the largest monster in there or die trying. The Lanterns had brought back word months later that he'd been found in the mouth of a mansion-sized manticore, having allowed it to bit him so he could drive his spear through the roof of its mouth. He'd stayed with her through the grief, though even at the worst she'd been fiercely proud of the last honour he had brought to their Blood. The Pilgrim had expected they would part for the last time, after that, but Sintra had instead baldly announced her younger brother as her heir and that she would only ever wed a man who brought her the head of every prince and princess in Procer. And so the balcony door remained unlocked, home remained home.

It was not the life he had seen for himself, as a child, but Tariq found to his surprise that he was happy. Even the Ophanim, whose presence he had once found unsettling, had become trusted and cherished friends. Partners more farsighted than he, helping him see where he needed to go before he knew he needed to be there. He still passed through Levante whenever he could, to see his sister and play with his young nephew. Izil was a riotous little joy, with all his mother's cleverness already showing signs of sharing his father's tall height and broad built. Seven

years after her ascension to the Tattered Throne, Yasa Isbili took an arrow through the eye while riding down to harbour to greet Ashuran envoys. She was dead before she touched the ground. The Grey Pilgrim was in Helike, helping a young prince flee his murderous uncle.

Tariq never would manage to forgive himself for that.

—

Izil was dry-eyed, when Tariq elbowed aside the guards to enter his nephew's room. Looking out the window, still as a statue. The long dark locks his mother had so often combed through affectionately were as listless as the boy himself, and those dark Isbili eyes had grown almost dull. The seven year old boy was clutching a toy pilgrim in his hands, the wooden figure's paint worn thin from use. He did not even turn when Tariq entered the room. One of the guards followed inside, grimacing as he spoke.

"Revered Pilgrim, you cannot—"

"Where is his father?" the Grey Pilgrim calmly asked.

The guard winced.

"As he is under suspicion, Honoured Brother Bakri has order confined him to his quarters," he said.

Tariq closed his eyes. Yasa had never worried of their younger brother, for all that his martial exploits had earned him repute. He'd never had a mind for the kind of wrangling the Majilis required, or even the more practical aspects of rule. This could be, he thought, Bakri simply making a mistake in his grief. Or it could be something else. *Honoured Brother* Bakri. As if Yasa's child was not the rightful successor.

"Bakri Isbili is now confined to his quarters until I order otherwise," the Grey Pilgrim mildly said. "My sister's husband is to be freed *immediately*."

Tariq opened his eyes and saw naked fear on the guard's face. Angry, roiling Light had shaped in rings around his wrists, he realized.

"I gave you an order, son," the Grey Pilgrim said. "See to it."

The man slowly bowed.

"Revered Pilgrim," he said. "Your will be done."

Tariq gave him a nod, then closed the door behind him. The Light winked out and he knelt by his nephew's side. The boy did not react.

"Izil," he softly said, laying a hand on the child's shoulder.
"Can you hear me?"

His nephew flinched at the contact, but some semblance of awareness returned to his eyes.

"Uncle?" the boy whispered.

"It's me," Tariq whispered, stroking the boy's hair gently. "Come back to us."

His little mouth trembled.

"Uncle," he mumbled. "Mother's gone. She – they..."

"It's all right, Izil," he said, holding him close. "I'm here now. I won't let anything happen to you, I swear."

His nephew wept, and when Tariq found who was responsible for this stars would rain until nothing was left but ashes.

No whispers came.

Peregrine III

*"Pilgrim of grey;
Fleet-foot, dusk-clad, the wanderer,
His stride rebellion and stirring ember
In his grasp the light of a morning star
Tattered his throne, tattered his war."*

– Extract from the 'Anthem of Smoke', widely considered the founding epic of the Dominion of Levant

Tariq's sole remaining brother had not aged well.

Bakri had boasted a warrior's build in his youth, and made good use of it to bring glory to their shared blood. Decades had passed since then, however, and what had once been hard muscle turned to fat and aching bones. Though the Grey Pilgrim was thirty eight years old, he knew himself to look in his early thirties. Bakri was two years younger, but at a glance would have seemed eldest among them. The thick beard of his brother was usually combed and oiled, but being confined to his quarters had apparently robbed the man of the desire for such sophistication. The dark hair was hoarse and wild, Bakri's eyes the red of one who had not slept a full night in too long. Tariq did not wait for an invitation to sit after the door was closed behind him, instead leaning against the doorframe as he watched his brother pour himself wine from a bronze carafe.

"Brother," Bakri greeted him. "Finally you make time for me. Should I be kneeling in thanks?"

Tariq did not reply. He stood there, in silence, and wondered what it was about thrones that made men go mad.

"Am I to beg for my life, *Pilgrim*?" Bakri snarled. "Is this your justice I've heard so much of?"

The Ophanim were silent. Had been, since Tariq had first entertained the thought of using his gifts in anger. For that silence he thought less of them. He might have been changed by his Bestowal, but blood still ran through his vein. There were things beyond the purview of mercy. Still, the loss of the whispers was keenly felt. Without their guidance, he felt half-blind. They had known much, and shared freely. Now all he had to call on was his eyes and his wits.

"Just get it over with, Tariq," his brother tiredly said. "You need someone to hang for this and you've chosen me. What point is there in making game of it first?"

"You did not act," the Grey Pilgrim finally said, "like an innocent man."

"And that is enough to make me guilty?" Bakri mocked.

No, Tariq admitted to himself. It was not. Confining Yasa's husband and isolating their nephew was the blatant premise to a grab for the Tattered Throne, but it was no proof that Bakri had a hand in their sister's death. All it was testimony to was ambition and poor character.

"You always did love her best," his brother bitterly said, drinking deep of his wine.

He wiped a trickle away from his chin.

"And she you," Bakri continued. "There was never any room for anyone else."

"I loved her best," Tariq said softly, "because she was the best of us."

"Mother was a fucking vulture of a woman," his brother smiled thinly. "But at least she never played favourites in her disregard. You two, though? You threw us the scraps of what you held for each other and expected your feet licked for it. I didn't kill her, Tariq. But I will not weep for a woman I shared only blood with."

It was a stranger he was looking at, the Pilgrim understood. A man he barely knew. A few childhood memories were no compass to the roiling sea of bitterness and frustration that stood before him. For the first time in many years, he felt adrift. Unable to tell truth from lie, black from white. He could not see into the

soul of men: like everyone else he was groping blindly in the dark, hoping he would not stumble into a chasm.

"Our nephew, Bakri," he said. "Caged and left to fade. Yasa's son. Does even that really mean so little to you?"

The other man sneered.

"You sanctimonious prick," he said. "You traipse around the world following stories, and now you've gone and convinced yourself that's the truth of Creation. Like there's never been killing within the Blood. Like a bit of red in the veins means we really owe each other all the oaths we break. Look around you, Pilgrim."

Bakri opened his arms, jeering.

"Did you really think *meaning well* was enough?" he said. "That it stopped being a throne because the first man to hold it was a hero? This isn't one of your pretty adventures, it doesn't end with everyone smiling and coming home. Sometimes it ends with a Seljun being a little *too good* and getting an arrow in the fucking throat for it. We don't all get to leave when we feel like it, Tariq. Some of us have to live where the Heavens don't look too closely."

For a moment, he thought of killing his brother. It would be easy as making a fist. Light would lash out, burn through the man's throat, and that would be the end of it. But that was anger, that was blood. It was the same ugliness in Bakri's voice, only with greater power behind it. *Please*, Tariq thought, closing his eyes. *Help me*. Sometimes, all you could do to beat back the night was light a candle. *Please*, he prayed, *help me see. That I might do more than add suffering to suffering, injustice to injustice, grief to grief*. He prayed, and was answered.

The Grey Pilgrim opened his eyes and knew it was his gift to **Behold** the truth of was what hidden.

He saw in his sole remaining sibling fear and rage, and ambition like poison. Grief, too, however slight. But deep beneath it all he saw guilt. A hand offered and taken.

"Tell me," Tariq said, voice like stone and steel. "*Tell me who you sold our sister to, Bakri.*"

After that he saw fear, mostly.

It did not stay his hand.

—

When the lords and ladies of the Dominion came to Levante for his sister's funeral games, the city felt as if a shroud had fallen over it. Until the first of them had arrived he had spent his

hours with Izil, keeping the fragile flame remaining in his nephew from dying out, but when the greats of Levant arrived Tariq was forced to leave the boy's side. There would be an election in the Majilis, when the games came to a close, and there was only one result he would brook. Yasa's son would be the Holy Seljun, his father holding regency until the boy came of age. Yet for all that none denied him audience, and instead made great pageantry of receiving him, the answers he received were evasive. These people, he thought, had professed loyalty to Yasa. Followed her with eagerness, with pride. And together with her they had served Levant well. And yet now the loyalty had waned, replaced by guarded eyes and cautious tongues. What had been granted to the mother would not be inherited by the son.

"They're afraid, Tariq," Sintra told him.

That much he had known. He could not fail to see it, now that his eyes had been opened by Above. He had stolen a moment with his lover in a tucked away corner of the old city, where none would see them. Much as he would have preferred to speak only between Tariq and Sintra, they were not only that. The Grey Pilgrim and the Lady of Alava need speak as well.

"Bakri died at my hand," Tariq acknowledged.

"Died?" Sintra murmured. "There were only cinders left. That is more than death. And for all that, fear is not what the act earned you. You passed judgement as the Grey Pilgrim, and none would deny your right to end a traitor. It is those that clasped hands with Bakri that still tongues."

"I am the only man alive to have heard his confession," the Pilgrim flatly stated.

"We're not fools, Tariq," Sintra sighed. "Your brother might have greased a few palms in the harbour, but it was not one of ours who loosed the arrow. There are only two who could have given the order, and neither is to be trifled with."

"Procer," he said. "Ashur."

He turned to look upon the love of his life as the silence lingered, and what he beheld filled him with pride. There was iron in this daughter of the Champion's Blood. Fear as well, but it did not bend her spine as it did so many others he has spoken to.

"Which was it?" Sintra quietly asked.

That was the question, he knew, plaguing the thoughts of every person of influence in Levant. Was it their protectors in the Thalassocracy that had seen a Dominion resurgent, less eager to take instructions from committees on an island across the water,

and acted to smother the insolence before it could grow further? Or was it the covetous packs of royalty past the Red Snake Wall who had struck the blow, wary of a Levant that would not retreat at the mere hint of the First Prince's displeasure? Neither were enemies anyone could truly afford.

"The Prince of Orense," Tariq finally told her. "Bakri believed it was with the tacit permission of the First Prince himself."

Sintra let out a sharp breath.

"Prince Alejandro Trastanes," she murmured. "Do they plan to invade?"

"No," he replied just as quietly. "It was a petty thing, Sintra. That is, perhaps, the most absurd part of it. We have silver veins of our own, now, and no longer rely on his for coinage. His treasury thinned as a result. Worse, he foresaw that the Ashurans would rather use our silver than his for their own mints."

Bakri was to declare those very veins as having run out, after a few years, and quietly the old sales would have resumed. The Levantine silver would have gone to the treasury of the Seljun instead of the mints in Levant and Ashur. A stupid, petty waste. And for that Yasa had died.

"There are some who'll say electing Izil to the Tattered Throne would be sending a message," his lover said. "That we will not desist."

"That we will not bow to fear," Tariq mused. "I can see how this would not be popular, as so many of us wish to do so."

"They've never been shy about sending knives south," Sintra darkly said. "They know Ashur will only stir against invasion. And that's always been the unspoken guarantee from Salia hasn't it? Do not be a threat, and you will not be troubled. We became a threat. Trouble found us."

"It doesn't matter," Tariq said. "When the games end, Izil will stand before the Majilis as candidate for the Tattered Throne."

"You don't have the votes," his lover told him. "One of Bakri's children will be raised, it is almost a certainty."

"You misunderstand," he said. "They are bowing, Sintra, to fear."

"And?" she frowned.

"When Izil stands, I will stand with him," the Grey Pilgrim said.

He met her eyes, and smiled thinly.

"Alejandro Trastanes is very far away. *I am here.*"

Nine days later, Izil Isbili was unanimously elected the Holy Seljun of Levant. His uncle stood in silence behind the seven-year-old boy as the votes were cast into the large brass cup, but for once the pale stones meaning support made no sound as they fell.

The cup, after all, was already filled with the ashes of Bakri Isbili.

The following dawn, Tariq began marching north.

—

Orense was prosperous.

The principality as well, he had seen while treading the roads and fields, but the capital of the principality stood above the rest in that regard. Traders from all over southern Calernia could be found haggling in the streets in a smattering of tongues, be it the fluid tradertalk of the Free Cities or the elegant Ceseo of the southern Dominion. Colourful cloths and elegant furs, ripe fruit and vivid painted slates: the markets of Orense were a thriving throng, a centre of commerce. And among them, all was traded for the silver of Prince Alejandro Trastanes' mines. It was the fortune of the Trastanes line to own these, it was said, but also that of its subjects. The city would not attract so many if not for the remarkable purity and quantity of its ore. Tariq had not known it was possible to hate the bounty of the earth before then, but he had learned. Pieces of metal glinting in the sun could take a life months of riding away, even if they were not spent for the purpose. All they needed to do was *exist* and men would do horrors for the purpose of owning them, or keeping them, or even ensuring other did not have them.

He had spent most his life shielding people little different than these from the wickedness of the world. Divested himself of the right to be bound to his lover in the eyes of any but each other, of having a home for more than a summer's length and even of half the name he had been born to. And yet, blind to anything but the coins that saw the wheels of their existence keep turning, they had killed his sister. Tariq could not hate them for that. No, he could. He would not allow himself to. He had made sacrifices, but not with the expectation of reward. That exceptions would be made for him and those he loved. If a good act was done only at the condition of recompense, then it was not that — it was a mere transaction made with the Heavens. Yet it would have been dishonest to say it did not infuriate him, deep down, that Yasa had died and it was not so much as a ripple in the sea that was Creation. All were as specks of dust, in the eyes of Above. All were as the entire world, in the eyes of Above. The Lanterns had long taught this and Tariq knew more of the truths of the Heavens

than most, but never before had he been forced to look that particular truth in the eye.

For days he walked the streets of Orense, taking the measure of the people and through them their ruler. Prince Alejandro was well-liked, he learned. The man leant the weight of his name and influence to the charitable enterprises of the House of Light, and after a string of sicknesses had ordered the sewers beneath the capital fully cleaned out for the first time in many years – at his own expense, without raising taxes to fill his coffers afterwards. He paid his watchmen and soldiers well, better than his mother had, and always on time. The prince favoured the merchants of his land above others, but did not do so egregiously and did not use the livelihood of others as means in his disagreements with other royalty. Some said that he spent too much time in Salia, at the court of the First Prince, but others argued that Orense had benefited from his influence there. There were less flattering rumours, of paramours entertained even though he was wed and duels fought for frivolous purposes, but these were old and looked upon with a forgiving eye.

Tariq was not certain what he had truly expected. Few men presented themselves as devils, even when keeping covenant with their kind, and it was said Arlesites were more attached than most to their repute. It still filled him with dismay, that priests from the House of Light could sing the praises of a man who had ordered murder. The people could be fooled, and often were. Yet he had believed, in some way, that those wielding the light of the Heavens would not be so easily taken in. It took him days, forcing himself not to act before having fully seen what there was to see, before he admitted to himself that perhaps the people of Orense had not been fooled at all. That the prince *did* behave well towards them. That the priests did not condemn the man because they had not been given reason to. It was a strange thing, coming to the understanding that a man could be both wicked and kind. That one did not chase away the other and claim the whole of the person. Strange and displeasing.

After twelve days, Tariq had assuaged his conscience and he set out once more. For a man of his talents, it was merely tedious to slip into the towering palace that belonged to the Trastanes. Even without the guidance of the Ophanim neither soldiers nor watchmen caught sight of him moving under cover of night, and the sorceries pervading the grounds were no true bar. The nature of the wards was sister to miracles, in some arcane way, and there were few even among the Bestowed who understood miracles as Tariq did. Whispers opened cracks to creep through, Light blooming and fading as he passed through gardens and climbed a tall trellis. From there he reached a balcony, a brush of fingers unmaking the locks and allowing him to enter unseen the private study of the Prince of Orense. Tariq closed the doors behind him, and settled in a fashionable sofa to wait until the man arrived. Servants

came first, to put the study in order and leave a tray of fragrant tea and assorted spice cookies, but he moved where they were not looking and so they did not see him.

The Grey Pilgrim was sipping at a perfectly-brewed cup of Thalassinian black leaf when the man who ordered the murder of his sister entered the study. He waited in silence until the prince sat at his beautiful redwood desk and reached for a cup that was not there. Calmly, he set down the tea.

"Alejandro Trastanes," Tariq said. "There will be no point to shouting."

His advice was ignored, unsurprisingly. The Prince of Orense was still in good shape, for a man his age, though Tariq ruefully admitted to himself that the royal was likely younger than himself. The healer was no longer so young as to be able to casually pass such a judgement. Once shouting proved fruitless, the man drew a thin blade.

"You will not find me easy meat, assassin," Prince Alejandro snarled in Tolesian,

"Not assassin," Tariq calmly corrected in the same. "Pilgrim."

From the beginning he had beheld what lay at the heart of the man, fear and pride and anger, but not he saw the second of the first of these begin devouring the others. The tipping point, he thought, was when Alejandro Trastanes realized he was alone in a room with a Bestowed whose sister he'd recently had murdered. The man was not without bravery, but few among even the most crazed of villains would care to try odds such as those. And this was no villain, no champion of Below. Only a man, with all the evil banality of that stature.

"You know not what trouble you borrow, Levantine," the prince said.

How mundane it was now, to see through bluster. Neither tone nor posturing could hide the cold fear spreading through the soul of the man. Tariq wondered if he should enjoy the sight of that, for he found he did not. Even Yasa's death was not enough to whet his appetite for cruelty, it seemed. He almost wished that it had been. It would make the accusations Bakri had laid at his feet echo slightly less.

"Sit down," Tariq said.

"And then?" the prince asked.

Hope, the slightest bit of it.

"We will have a conversation," the Grey Pilgrim said. "And when it ends, I will kill you."

Peregrine IV

"Justice is not the end of a road, the closing of a tale. One cannot be just, one can only act justly: it is a struggle from cradle to grave, not a prize seized and kept."

– Daphne of the Homilies, best known for ending hereditary rule in Atalante

"You are not, I think, an evil man," Tariq pensively said. "I have seen those among your peers who have allowed desire to master all else, and you fall well short of that depravity."

Prince Alejandro Trastanes of Orense hid his fury well, though it was a paltry effort in the face of the sight the Gods had granted the Grey Pilgrim. Tariq was still learning the subtleties of the aspect despair had led him towards, the answer to his frightened prayer. To behold the truth of someone was not as paging through a manuscript, all to be found laid out in neat calligraphy. It was more akin to exposing a raw nerve, seeing what made it tense and flinch. Deeper natures could be learned from such a thing, the needs and beliefs that drove men like men drove carts, but to grasp truths less primal his own wit was needed. The Prince of Orense, for example, did not feel fury untainted. It was woven along the thread of pride, both arrogant and earned. Alejandro Trastanes was furious, Tariq decided, because a man he considered his inferior was passing judgement over him.

"Yet," Tariq continued, "it cannot be denied that you have done an evil thing."

Regret tightened in the man's soul, but it was threaded too deep with fear to be genuine. It was the regret of one caught and facing consequence, not any true repentance. Pride pushed aside the rest, hand in hand with something more resolute.

"Good things as well," the Prince of Orense said. "No true judgement, that which ignores all there is to be judged."

Tariq had thought there would be only rage in him, facing the man who had ordered the murder of his sister. Something burning and righteous, a flame that would only gut out when the blot on Creation was harshly erased. Instead he found himself hesitant, as if on the edge of a precipice tall and windy. Like there should be consideration where before he had believed there would only be verdict. The Choir of Mercy spoke not a whisper, had not since his last brother had gone from traitor to ash. The Ophanim watched, always did, but now they kept their own council. The choices were his to make, the consequences his to discern. *Is this disappointment, old friends, he wondered, or is it respect?*

"You speak as if justice is a scale," Tariq said. "The good of a man weighed against the bad, an arithmetic of choices."

Alejandro Trastanes had set down the sword he had bared in surprise, when finding the intruder in his sanctum, and the Pilgrim had placed the now-empty cup of Praesi tea he'd taken by its side. The fragrance of the dark leaves from faraway Thalassina wafted up still, filling the small study with its scent. A single pot of that tea, Tariq knew, was worth a week of meals for a small family. That was the kind luxury the lean man across the desk was accustomed to, thinking it so natural it was not worthy of acknowledgement. Power held and kept for so long it was no longer questioned. Prince Alejandro thumbed the pendant hanging from his neck, the copper rose that held almost-unreadable inscriptions on the petals. *Beware of war, for in waging it to earthly purpose you have lost the war waged within your soul.* Famous words, these. Written by the renowned holy woman Sister Salienta in her work 'The Faith of Crowns'.

"Is it not, Pilgrim?" the dark-eyed prince said. "Why else would the Heavens wait until death to part the wheat from the chaff? The sum of a man cannot be a single act, worthy or wicked."

—

Izil Isbili, Holy Seljun of Levant, was eight years old.

The listlessness in the boy's dark eyes had waned, after he was returned to his father. It took months of kindness and safety, of his uncle standing by his bed as the nightmares of sudden arrows and gasping deaths woke him screaming, until Tariq's nephew became a child again. And the something more, for the Blood ran true. Tariq had beheld in silence as fire spread where there before had been a hole in the shape of Yasa, grief turning to the burning will to act. To do more than hold a title and officiate the debates of the great of Levant, to set out into the world unbent in the face of fear. Tariq beheld, and knew that in the precise moment where anguish was transmuted to resolve Izil had never more been his mother's son. It was a second chance, the Pilgrim thought, a mercy bestowed upon him by the Heavens. His sister given back to him in that small, frail body moved by something greater than itself. And so Tariq stayed in Levante, where his heart had died and been born again.

He watched as his nephew sunk his teeth into his lessons with ferocious tenacity. Numbers and letters, every line of Blood and their greatest deeds. The routes of trade by sea and land, the beasts that still roamed the rough countryside of the Dominion or laired in its deep forests. Languages, more than even Tariq himself knew. The Three Sisters – Lunara, Ceseo, Murcadan – but also Tolesian and Chantant, Ashur's High Tyrian and the tradertongue of the Free Cities. All these Izil Isbili attacked with a fervour that belied his age, and what others at first

dismissed as a child's fancy turned to admiration when the passing of months did nothing to fray it. At the age of nine the lessons of ink and word were portioned to leave room for those of steel, and there Tariq asked favour: in blade and warfare, his nephew's tutor would be the Lady of Malaga herself. Sintra left her holdings in the hand of her brother and heir, and his heart sang almost as much for her presence at his side as it did for the sight of her teaching Izil how to swing a sword. The trite, mundane evil of mankind had robbed the world of Yasa Isbili, of all that she might have accomplished. Of all that she had to give to the land she had so deeply loved.

The Grey Pilgrim could think of no greater answer to that sin than helping her son do it all in her place.

—

"You speak of the soul as a ledger to balance," Tariq said. "Like an evil can be excused, if there is an act of greater good to match it against. But every act matters. Each is judged, each is held up to the teachings of the Heavens. Holding to virtue nine choices out of ten does not make the tenth any less of a sin."

Alejandro Trastanes laughed, the bark of it quiet but fierce.

"You speak as one of the Chosen," the prince said. "One in a thousand times a thousand. How many mortals match your exacting standards, I must wonder? I am not *exceptional*, Pilgrim, in any sense of the word. I have been done ill, and done ill in turn — as those before me have, and those after will."

"Is the wickedness of others an excuse for our own, then?" Tariq said. "Once upon a time the Empress Triumphant lived, and evils greater than any before her did she enact. Are all we born since that day to live lawless for it? Should our forebears have wallowed in vice and submission, instead of casting down the Tower?"

"You take my meaning to the absurd," the prince said. "I did not walk under the same skies as the Empress Most Dread, and cannot speak to what I might have done then. I *can* speak as a prince among princes, born in this day. Did you not say, Chosen, that you have seen those among my peers mastered by desire and made vile for it?"

Tariq nodded, for he had. Crowned heads and those of their blood, having grown to see the span of their authority as a fence to break instead of a boundary to dread. Those who drunk of privilege so deeply they became intoxicated with the exemption of consequence to their actions.

"Why then, Grey Pilgrim, do you sit in *my* study and not theirs?" the Prince of Orense said.

—

Izil Isbili, Holy Seljun of Levant, was ten years old.

He'd sprouted like a weed, over the last year, and there was fond jest in the old city that never before had a Seljun needed ceremonial garb so quickly adjusted in size. Not even the almost legendarily fat Jarin Isbili, who by the age of thirty would have broken the back of a horse simply by mounting it. Tariq nephew was also patiently teaching a girl mere months younger than him how to properly place her feet to accurately loose an arrow. The Pilgrim watched it unfold, leaning against the edge of the balcony overlooking the palace's archery yard, and smiled at the sight. Sintra chuckled, similarly amused.

"Do you think he's figured out she damn well knows how to shoot a bow, by now?" his lover asked.

Tariq glanced at the woman at his side, and could not help but see more than his lover – there was also the Lady Marave, ruler of Alava, and it was her niece speaking with his nephew below. The daughter of her brother and heir. Now that Izil was growing older, what might have once been children at play held other implications. Sintra's niece was not the only girl of similar age brought to Levante since the turn of the year, and none of them had been more than two degrees from one of the ruling lines of the Dominion. Word had spread that his sister's talents had flowered again in her son, and this time few of the mighty in Levant did not want blood tie to the boat they thought would rise with the tide.

"He has," Tariq said, looking away. "He'll be seeing how outrageous he can make the lesson before she visibly reacts."

Sintra snorted approvingly.

"That'll teach the girl," she said. "She's of the Champion's line, not some delicate flower in need of hand-holding."

He inclined his head, neither in agreement nor disagreement. Whatever Sintra's niece might have intended, she was interrupted by a throng of other children. Many of them girls, meant for the same purpose, but there were boys as well. Two Tanja cousins from Malaga, a main line Ifriqui from Vaccei, even the youngest brother of the ruling Osenia in Tartessos. Two dozen children, all in all, some from minor Blood but all from an old line. The jostled and the laughed and they argued, but all of them turned towards his nephew like sunflowers following the sun. He could already see it in them, the beginning of true kinship. And now that Sintra's niece was among the lot, an old path was taking shape. Champion, Binder, Slayer, Brigand, Pilgrim. The founding lines of the Dominion, coalescing around an Isbili.

Izil's reign would be many things, Tariq suspected, but banal would not be one of them.

—

"I am here," the Pilgrim said, "because you ordered the murder of my sister."

The prince's surprise was obvious. He had, Tariq saw, expected denial and obfuscation. Or perhaps some sort of justification for twining mortal kinship with an act that would see the powers of a Bestowed put to use. The healer saw no need for any such convolution, for the truth was plain and even if it had been unworthy he would not have balked from it. It was, however, not unworthy in the slightest.

"Then this is vengeance," Prince Alejandro said. "And not justice, for all your pretence otherwise."

"You have ordered the murder of another child of the Heavens," Tariq mildly said. "You are now being put to judgement for this act. Where, prince, is the injustice?"

"You are no impartial judge," the Prince of Orense said.

"The act is writ in you," the Pilgrim said. "Confession was given as to the means and motive. The truth is clear as cloudless sky. There is no partiality to be *had*."

"That you are here at all is partial," the other man hissed. "Are there no greater evils to be seen to than a man with blood on his hands? Are there not thousands in Procer alone who have done what I have done, and more of it still?"

"And this," Tariq said, "excuses your act?"

"You chose me," Alejandro Trastanes insisted. "Is that just, Pilgrim? That what brought you here is a brother's wrath, yet you would force on me a Chosen's fatal decree?"

"I chose the evil that was wrought," Tariq said. "And that evil brought me to you, demanding reckoning. You are not *underserving*, Alejandro Trastanes."

—

Izil Isbili, Holy Seljun of Levant, was twelve years old.

Too serious for a child, Tariq often thought, but then was this not so often the way for tragedy's get? Joy did not come easy to Izil, though neither was it unknown to him. Curiosity came more often, and when the line of teacher and pupil did not stand between them his nephew sometimes sought out his company for talk of faraway places. Of the Heavens and the Gods Above they did not

speaking, for Tariq would not force such harsh truths on one so young. It was not all harshness, the Pilgrim knew. There was kindness and warmth, too, a patience to the grace that was offered to all the souls of Creation. But Good could not be only that, lest Evil triumph over it, and fool he might be but he still hoped Izil might never have to embrace that axiom. Not if Tariq remained at his side, as he should have Yasa's. Once the Pilgrim had been blind to the ugliness that cornered his kin even as he journeyed across Calernia to ward off the same taint, but he would not repeat his mistake. The Ophanim had answered that choice with only silence, but he knew they did not disapprove.

They were waiting, patient in the giving of their grace.

The summer night was lazing on towards dawn when his nephew knocked at his door. Tariq's sleep had long been light, so it was with messy robes with sharp mind that he ushered in Izil. The boy's eyes were surrounded by dark circles, and the older man wondered if his nephew had not begun to push himself too hard. His mother had been the same, once upon a time, that light in her almost furious that there was so much to learn and so little time to learn it. That hours would need to be wasted on something as empty as sleep. The Pilgrim's calloused hand tucked back an errant curl of hair on Izil's brow. They both pretended his nephew did not lean into the touch. The same way they pretended Izil did not sometimes look at him in a way that whispered *father*, and at Sintra with an even more hesitant *mother*. There were too many knots unseen to it, too many things unresolved. All grieved Yasa Isbili still, and Izil's true father still lived. But the boy had grown to resent the man's powerlessness, Tariq had beheld it unfold. And shameful as it was, neither he nor Sintra had turned away the affection so quietly offered.

They would never have children, the two of them. Yet sometimes, when he watched his lover teach Izil the swordsman's stance from the balcony, he could almost close his eyes and... It was a shameful thing, but Tariq had not pulled away from it as perhaps he should have.

"Sleep is not without purpose, Izil," Tariq gently chided. "The books will still be there come morn."

His nephew's dark eyes – *Yasa's eyes, Isbili eyes* – flicked down, but in the boy he saw the truth that his assumption had been mistaken.

"Nightmares," Tariq stated, and withdrew his hand. "I will make us tea, then."

The Ashuran leaves were bitter on the tongue, though he had always been partial to the taste. His nephew was not, and so he now kept a small pot of honey in his rooms. It was not long before the water was boiled and poured into ornate clay cups Tari

had been gifted by a grateful merchant in Nicae, what felt like a lifetime ago. While he set himself to the work, his nephew had wandered onto the balcony and the stained glass doors to it lay open. The Pilgrim joined his nephew outside, and pressed the warm cup into the boy's hands. They stood there for some time, waiting for the tea to cool they watched the distant sea. A storm was brewing, very far away.

"You have been to Procer, uncle," Izil said.

"I have," Tariq agreed. "Many a time, when I wandered still. It is a strange land, in many ways. Its people are capable of both great sacrifices and great odiousness, and it is not always a different soul that holds this capacity."

"They made us slaves, once upon a time," Izil softly said, eyes on the dawning storm. "Took everything that we were, until we took it back with blood."

"All those that did the taking are long passed, nephew," Tariq quietly replied. "We do disservice to the living by warring in the name of the dead."

"Are they?" Izil said, turning with a hard stare. "Gone, truly?"

The Grey Pilgrim met his eyes, and said nothing.

"It doesn't matter," the Holy Seljun of Levant suddenly said. "It doesn't matter if they're dead, uncle, because their children are just like them. Blood told. The only difference between the princes that took Levant and those that rule now is that there's a wall in the way. And walls don't protect from everything, do they?"

"Someone told you," Tariq said.

"Of course someone told me," Izil tiredly replied. "I am to rule, one day. They all curry favour."

"Mercy," he said, "can be a cold thing to behold. But it must be offered, nonetheless."

"Why?" his nephew said. "We might as well be tossing silvers into the sea, uncle. They do not *learn*. They do not *change*. They take because they think themselves stronger, that no one will ever call them to account."

"It's not about them, Izil," Tariq said. "It's about us. Who we are willing to be, when the choice stands before us."

"They didn't give Mother a choice," Izil hissed, eyes reddening. "They just *shot* her."

The weeping took him, after that, and Tariq cradled his nephew's small frame as the sobs made it shake. He would only understand it years later, that you cannot truly look at someone when you hold them so closely.

—

Tariq's hand was already raised, when the door flew open. It was not soldiers with swords bared that entered. That would not have seen him release the Light as he did. No, it was laughing children. A girl and boy, neither older than seven, both dark-haired and bearing clever green eyes.

"Papa," the girl said. "Gorja said that—"

"She's lying," the boy insisted.

Neither of them even noticed him sitting across from their father, a bare sword and a pot of tea between them. Their mother — tall and shapely, fair-haired — followed behind, looking as put-upon as amused. Prince Alejandro had gone still as a statue, and Tariq did not need to look to know the terror that had seized him.

"*Caridon*," the mother began in Tolesian, "It appears that—"

She froze at the sight of them, at the blankness of her husband's face.

"Children," she said, voice tight. "Your father is entertaining a guest."

Their eyes only turned to Tariq then, and he smiled gently. They both looked dubious at his presence, perhaps skeptical that their princely father would entertain one as obviously travel-worn as he. They were mannerly enough not to speak their thoughts.

"I will speak with you all later," Prince Alejandro said, his tone admirably calm. "But you must leave me to attend to this matter first."

"Come along," the Princess of Orense said, tone brisk as she tugged back her children.

The boy protested, and her fingers clenched like claws when she forcefully dragged him out. Tariq rose to close the doors himself, as they had not.

"My family, Pilgrim," the prince said. "They are not — they did not know."

A lie, Tariq beheld it immediately. He must have spoken of the matter with his wife.

"I am not the murderer in this room," the Pilgrim said. "They have nothing to fear from me."

Prince Alejandro's answering smile was bleak.

"Not yet, no," he said.

And that, more than anything else spoken tonight, gave Tariq pause.

"The girl," he murmured. "She is eldest?"

"My heir," the prince agreed, just as quietly.

He could see it, Tariq thought, as clearly as if the Ophanim had granted him the vision. The shape of this, sculpted by ineffable hands. In Levante, the son of a slain mother. In Orense, the daughter of a slain father. Between them a wrath that no fear no reason would abate, and the sea of corpses it would lead to. War between Levant and Procer, and how it would pull in all the rest. Ashur, wary of its protectorate again being swallowed by the greatest power of Calernia, would strike out. In the League of Free Cities war would bloom sure as the coming of dawn, from the opportunities or the mere debate over whether they should be taken or allowed to pass. It would spiral outwards, a madness that would make a hundred thousand orphans out of the unbending hatred laying between two. Tariq would not stay his hand because Alejandro Trastanes had a family that loved him. It changed nothing. But neither could he raise his hand in the service of unnecessary suffering.

"You will abdicate," the Grey Pilgrim said, and soft as the words were they rang with the steel of a decree. "And spend the rest of your life as a lay brother in the House of Light."

The Prince of Orense shivered.

"That is just," the man who'd murdered Yasa said.

"No, it isn't," Tariq sadly said.

But it was not the Choir of Justice that he was sworn to.

—

Izil Isbili, Holy Seljun of Levant, was fifteen years old.

With the turn of dawn he would be sixteen and rule the Dominion of Levant in truth. For many years he had prepared for this day, Tariq knew. Promises had been made, both in the realm and beyond it. Grand designs had been patiently awaited, and among them lay the taking of war to the north. Years of argument had done nothing to change this, or change the choice of those who would go to war at the side of Izil Isbili. And so the Grey Pilgrim

tread the quiet halls of the palace, in the dark of night, and into his nephew's rooms did he creep. He wept as he pressed the pillow over the boy's face, but his hand did not fail. He would despise himself for this, Tariq knew, until the day he died. But he despised unnecessary suffering even more. The Ophanim laid their hand on his shoulder, afterwards, in comfort. Their saddened whispers broke the silence of many years with a chorus of grief.

But none called him *wrong*.

Inexorable

"Courage and cowardice fill the same grave, but earn different eulogy."

– Lycaonese saying

Otto Reitzenberg's crown sat ill on his brow, and always would. On it weighed the three deaths that had carried him through the gates of Sternlerin fortress: his father and sisters, every one of them a better and braver soul than he. They had perished at the Enemy's hand, and with every death further down the line of succession the crown was passed until it sat on his brow. Sat laden with the weight of those who should have led their people instead. Sometimes he thought he could hear them in the wind. Father's rasping laughter, his throat never quite recovered from the poison on the rattling spear. Gude's calm and steady drone, never moved to haste by fear nor displeasure. Elsa's thundering wraths and kindnesses, neither any less terrible than the other. The Enemy had come for the House of Reintzenberg, that day, and spared only the runt of the litter. For the blood he carried on his brow his people had named him Otto Redcrown, and in his hands the heavy charge of turning back the tide of the Dead had been left.

He was not that charge's equal.

"Come now, Reitzenberg," the other man drawl, "no need to look so grim. The situation's markedly improved since this morning."

The Prince of Bremen scowled at his companion, unamused by the attempted levity. Prince Frederic Goethal was the very personification of every mocking tale shared around fires about the Alamans – covered in silks and ribbons, his long flaxen hair cascading down in ringlets all the way to his shoulders and usually drunk well before noon. The Prince of Brus was also the only ruler from south of Neustria to have sent so much as a single sword to join the defence of Lycaonese lands. And it was more than a sword the man had ridden with: near the entire army of Brus had made for Twilight's Pass under the prince. Frederic was, Otto believed, both a finer soldier and a finer tactician than the Prince of Bremen himself. Yet he was also as prone to

preening as the colourful azure and crimson kingfisher that was the banner of the House of Goethal. The juxtaposition of the two was disconcerting, made more so by the fact that the man was barely twenty and boyish in looks besides.

"I do not see how, Prince Frederic," Otto said. "For one, this appears to be a dragon."

The long stretch of mountain passes, valleys and narrow ridges popularly known as Twilight's Pass had several choke points, the jagged pits of Volsaga being the latest they had been forced to defend. Volsaga Fortress itself, raised on a narrow strip between two sharp cliffs, had held for a fortnight as the dead massed their hosts under cover of constant, grinding assaults. It might have held for another fortnight, Prince Otto thought, if not for the Dead King unleashing the skeletal horror he'd just referred to. The gargantuan dragonlike thing had torn through the outer walls, ignoring like arrows and stone like they were summer rain, and scattered the defenders as the lesser dead poured in. Now it was curled around a low peak that loomed above the path into the fortress, forbidding attempt to claw it back from the dead.

"'twas a dragon, perhaps," Prince Frederic mused. "It is now quite dead, one assumes."

"We pulled back in time," Otto grunted, ignoring the other man's words. "We'll save maybe half the companies we'd committed to the fortress. That is still a heavy loss. It will be a fighting retreat until Graueletter, too, and that abomination is bound to pursue."

"The dwarven ballistae seemed to have only irritated it, alas," the Prince of Brus conceded. "Though given the weather in this parts, it is a miracle the things work at all."

"How, then," Prince Otto patiently said, "has our situation improved since morn?"

"I would think that obvious, Reitzenberg," Prince Frederic said, and elegantly flicked his wrist upwards.

The Lycaonese prince glance upwards, and saw little more than the sky. There were none of the corpse-drakes, at least, which he supposed was a small mercy. Both archers and slingers were beginning run out of projectiles, and it would be days before the next supply convoy.

"I see nothing," Otto admitted.

"The sun has finally deigned to arrive, my friend," Prince Frederic cheerfully said. "We will, at least, perish slightly thawed."

A convulsive chuckle tore free of Otto's throat before he could help himself. It'd been a dark jest, but then Lycaonese humour was not renowned for its lightness. The Prince of Brus took a moment to push back his long curls, then glanced curiously to their side. The Farewell Stones were a striking sight, Otto would admit. The steles of granite carved straight from the stone went on for most of a mile along the mountain path, most of them with a large iron peg hammered through. Some were empty, others rusting, but in every last one a farewell in iron had once been made. It was not a monument the way southerners would know it, but to his people it held great meaning.

"I'll confess never to have heard of this shrine," the Prince of Brus said. "May I ask what it stands for? It does not seem dedicated to the Heavens, at least in no way I understand."

"It is not," Otto replied. "My people call them the Farewell Stones, and they are no hymn to Above. They are... a vow, I suppose. Oft renewed, never fulfilled."

"A Lycaonese custom, then," Frederic Goethal said, eyes curious.

"This place, Volsaga," Otto slowly explained. "It is halfway through Twilight's Pass, and the easiest path through it. Armies have marched here since before the days of the Iron Kings, when we were tribes held together only by fear of the dark."

The Alamans prince listened attentively, his face twisting with fascination.

"When we come through here, to march against the Plague or the Dead," Prince Otto said. "We make a farewell in the stone. Before going to war, we leave it as an oath."

"The spikes of iron," Prince Frederic murmured, glancing at the long stretch of them. "There must be hundreds, and the rust... Some of them are mere traces, now."

"We have done this," Otto Reitzenberg said, "for many hundred years. Every time knowing it might be the last. That this war could be the one that breaks us and lets the Enemy devour us all."

"But there is always a fresh farewell," the other man said, tone thoughtful.

Otto nodded, pleased her understood.

"When the farewells reach the end of the steles," the Prince of Bremen said, "those at the beginning have faded. So it has been, so it will be."

Otto turned to his sworn swords and curtly gestured. They came forward with a large fold of leather and opened it before the two royals. Inside was a large peg of iron, and another of his soldiers offered a steel-tipped hammer to accompany it. The Alamans prince smiled in understanding, eyes sweeping to the stele closest to them. Empty, save for some last traces of rust deep inside.

"You are to add your own farewell, I take it," Prince Frederic said.

"We," Otto Redcrown said.

The other man studied him closely.

"How many Alamans have given farewell here, Otto Reitzenberg?" he quietly asked.

"After today," Otto said, "there will be one."

The Prince of Brus paled, as if slapped.

"There is no need to-" he began, then bit his lip and when he resumed speaking his voice was hoarse. "There should be no reward for this, Prince Otto. Not for simply joining the battle when you've all had to bid farewell to these passes for centuries."

The Prince of Bremen shook his head, for after all the other royal did not understand him. Did not understand this.

"We are not better," Otto said. "We too have murdered and schemed, Frederic Goethal. We have warred on our own and on southerners for greed or lust for power. There is naught in our bones that sets us apart from the stuff of other men."

The last of the House of Reitzenberg straightened his back and took the iron peg he was being offered.

"It is the choice that matters," Prince Otto Redcrown said. "Of marching through the pass. Of leaving shelter behind so that you may shelter others."

The hammer was pressed into the hands of the Prince of Brus by a gruffly insistent armsman, and the fair-haired Alamans finally took it. There was no disapproval in the eyes of the soldiers sworn to Bremen, as Prince Frederic prepared to hammer in the peg that Otto was holding in place. There would be none from the soldiers of Hannover, either, or Rhenia and Neustria. Why would there be? When the call had sounded, when the Dead had crossed the lakes, only one prince had come north. The name of Frederic Goethal would be remembered in these lands so long as Lycaonese held them. The hammer came down, claiming three strokes before

iron nestled deep into rock. Otto clapped the shoulder of the other prince, after.

"We retreat to Graueletter," the Prince of Bremen gruffly said.

"No," Prince Frederic quietly replied. "No, not quite yet. You northerners are not the only ones with their pride."

The flaxen-haired man whistled sharply and there was a cheer from the slope below, as the two thousand horsemen that were his persona retinue raised their banners. The Prince of Brus sent for his horse and deftly mounted the saddle, claiming a long lance from his page.

"The fortress is lost, Prince Frederic," Otto told the man.

"That may be," the man smiled, "but you were not wrong, in saying the beast will pursue us during the retreat. Many will die, should it not be slain."

"Charging the path is a fool's errand," Prince Otto bluntly said. "It will kill you all."

"So we will do no such thing, my friend," Prince Frederic replied. "See the low peak where it looms, and the slope above it."

The Prince of Bremen flicked a look, only to confirm what he already knew.

"It is sheer enough to be called a cliff and not a slope," he said.

"We shall be most careful not to tumble, then," Frederic Goethal grinned, looking for all the world like an impish boy. "Worry not, Reitzenberg. We will return victorious, should we return at all."

"It is folly," Otto said.

"I am a Goethal of Brus, my friend," the prince said. "*I Dare* are the words of my blood, and to them I will keep. Prepare the retreat. We guests must meanwhile earn our keep."

The Prince of Brus rode away to join his retinue, and Otto stood on the heights above them spellbound. They were a colourful lot, these Alamans horsemen, a riot of silks in red and blue trailing behind their polished scale like fairy wings in the kingfisher's colours. Pages saw to their riders, and to the cheers of the soldiers offered up thin glasses of what Otto thought might be crystal. Pure crystal, exquisitely shaped and filled with red wine. Prince Frederic took up his own and led his mount to the fore of the retinue before raising his glass.

"Ladies and gentlemen – to Procer, and Her Most Serene Highness," he toasted.

As one, the soldiers toasted and drank. Not the full glass, the Lycaonese saw, but a mere sip of it.

"To our hosts."

The Alamans drank.

"To the kingfisher, may we never shame it," Prince Frederic said.

A cheer followed, and another sip. The Prince of Brus' horse arched impatiently, though even one-handed the man reined it in effortlessly. He laughed, loud and bright.

"To doom, and glorious death," he bellowed.

Madmen that they were, every single one of the Alamans flung their glasses against the ground. Crystal shattered, red wine spilled like blood, and behind Prince Frederic Goethal the riders followed. A fortune had been broken on stone in a moment of pique. Otto Redcrown watched as they rode up the mountain paths, disappearing in a crown of mists and stone. There was nothing he could do but arrange the retreat and wait, ordering bowmen companies forward to cover the retreat of the last soldiers escaping the fortress. The dragon of bones stirred at the sight, though it did not yet deign to intervene. There was still fighting taking place in the fortress courtyards behind it as the dead overwhelmed the last of the trapped defenders, and it lazily watched until nothing but the dead remained. Mere moments after, two thousand Alamans crested over the mountain path overlooking the abomination's perch.

Otto's fingers tightened as he saw them slow as they reached the edge of the slope, that steeply inclined bare rock precipitously tumbling down towards the skeletal horror that still remained perched over the path. The kingfisher banner rose glittering under the sun, blue and red and glittering gold, and two thousand lances were lowered as the cavalry thundered down the slope. To doom and glorious death Prince Frederic had summoned them, and the Alamans joined him laughing and singing their summer songs as they charged, silks trailing behind them like ephemeral wings. The beast only saw them too late, and like a pack of bright-clad wolves they tore at it. Tore at it and died. Leathery wings were ripped, but their beating still shattered horsemen and horses alike. Claws tore through armour and lace just as easily, maw crushed men and mount in a single screaming snap. But the madmen did not flinch or flee or withdraw. With hungry tenacity they carved up the abomination, 'til limbs had been rent and bones broken.

Until the Prince of Brus himself shattered the skull with a hammer, and the eldritch lights in the monster's eyeholes were snuffed out. The man raised it high above his head and the cheer from the army was deafening, defiant. A sliver of light brought to a dark day. Of the two thousand horsemen that sallied out, six hundred returned.

Easily thrice that many soldiers might have been lost in the retreat, if they had not gone.

—

There was going to be a snowstorm tonight.

Captain Bernhardt had learned to tell the signs: wind grew restless, and colder, but you could still taste the heaviness in the air. It'd be a rough watch for whoever served after dusk, even more so for the rationing he'd had to place on braziers. Charcoal and stones were running low, and the promised supplies from Bremen had never arrived. In the captains' private opinion, it was a toss-up whether it was the Enemy's warbands who were responsible or the ugly truth that there were only so many supplies to go around and half a dozen forces that needed them more than his own. Not that the territory Bernhardt had been ordered to hold was without importance: Hocheben Heights sloped down from the southern peaks of the Kaltwend, a broad plateau that stretched all the way to the rocky shores of Lake Pavin. It was a lock on the hard spit of land that stood between the Grave and the tributary river to Lake Pavin, heights overlooking lowlands now crawling with the dead and damned. There were only a few paths up the sheer cliffs, though, and he'd ordered them collapsed the moment he took command. The dead had only half-heartedly tried the climb a dozen times since, and been duly driven back. He could understand why commanders might send the wood and grain to Twilight's Pass or the Rhenian Gates instead, where every hour saw a fresh swarm of horrors unleashed.

It didn't make the nights any warmer for his soldiers, though.

The fair-haired captain mused loosening the rationing for the duration of the snowfall as he tread the icy stones of Emil's Displeasure, the long stretch of fortifications jutting from the edge of the plateau. The watchtowers were few, for this high up they were hardly needed, but Prince Emil Papenheim had not been skinflint in seeing to the defence of Hocheben. Stone parapets with punctured arrow slits oversaw the drop, and further back thick oaken trap doors led to the dug-in sections Hannoven soldiers fondly called the *Emilzorn*: tunnels leading to lower in the cliff side, through which ice-soaked trees and massive stones could be rolled down to fall at any force trying to climb up. Bernhardt had found the two hundred men and women left in Hocheben by the Iron Prince to be priceless, after coming to take command at the order of now-dead Prince Manfred Reiztenberg. His

three thousand soldiers were mostly Neustrians, as was he, and they'd never had to fight for the heights in their lifetime. The old garrison knew the paths, knew the defences, and Bernhardt had made sure to make their own captain his second. You couldn't trust a Hannover woman to crack a smile even at her own wedding, famously, but what Captain Elpeth lacked in humour she more than made up in ability to kill things.

Bernhardt tightened his furs around his shoulders as he passed the third and last watchtower, slowing his steps by the brazier tucked away behind it. The three soldiers out on watch looked up guiltily as his arrival, well aware at least one of them should be up on the tower at the mercy of the evening wind.

"Captain," the oldest among them began. "We-"

"Up," Bernhardt interrupted in a rasp. "Now, and I will pretend I saw nothing. Don't let it happen again."

The older man saluted, the spear but clacking against the cold stone beneath, and Bernhardt watched him hurry back to his post. The other two might have looked abashed, he thought, though it was hard to tell with the padded cheeks of the helmets hiding away so much of their faces.

"It will snow tonight," he told them. "Keep a careful eye out. The Enemy does not shiver or sleep."

"We will, sir," the youngest solemnly said.

Gods, he thought, she couldn't have been older than sixteen by the sound of her voice. The lock of red hair that'd slid out from under the rim of her helm was moving with the wind. No older than Bernhardt's own oldest daughter, which he'd seen off with the family coat of mail and his dead wife's sword. Seen off to march with Prince Manfred's host to hold Twilight's Pass against the Dead King, along with most the Neustrian volunteers. Fredda could be dead, for all he knew. Word from the fighting at the pass had been sparse, but what he'd heard had been enough to chill his blood.

"I'll take you at your word, soldier," Bernhardt said, tone softening.

It was a whim that drove him to stand at the battlements, to take a look over the edge into the howling winds. Far below bare trees and evergreens stood half-buried in snow, until a frozen river cut them off, and it was the sight of that river that raised his hackles. A large patch of ice was *cracked*. He could see no dead moving below among the trees, and yet...

"Sound the horns," he ordered. "All steel to the walls."

"Sir?" the girl asked.

"Now," he barked.

It was instinct, he knew, but there was something wrong. Captain Bernhardt stepped back and went looking through the sparse supply cache at the watchtower's side, until he found what he was looking for: a long torch, ending in a tightly-tied cloth soaked with oil. He plunged it into the brazier, waiting until it caught fire before stepping back to the edge of the battlements. Atop the watchtower the call to arms sounded, sharp and echoing across the heights. Steadying his hand, the captain tossed the lit torch over the edge of the cliff. For five, ten heartbeats he thought he'd made a fool of himself and utter relief swelled. Then the torch hit something that wasn't there, and after a sound like a broken mirror a hulking shape flickered into sight.

"Gods stand with us," he whispered.

It was no simple dead, but instead a great abomination. A misshapen thing made of men's bones and stretched out leather, shaped as some long-clawed bear with an overripe belly scaling the cliff. It must have been almost two hundred feet tall and half as large. Empty eye sockets turned to look at him, and with a keening sound the abomination leapt up.

"Spears at the ready," Captain Bernhardt ordered, hastily backing away from the edge.

Two sets of bones claws closed around the battlements, grinding against the stone, as behind Bernhardt the first reinforcing company spread out. Shafts of wood with tips of iron or steel dipped forward. The fair-haired Neustrian bared his sword, cursing himself for having left his shield at the barracks when setting out. The abomination's massive head came out, all leather and bone and blind malevolence. It opened its mouth, jaws unhinging, and with horror Bernhardt realized that the monster was not the whole of it: climbing relentlessly out of the dead thing's belly were sure-footed corpses, armed and armoured. It was a siege tower, he realized, the likes of which only the Dead King could possibly craft. And a precursor to all-out assault. They might hold here, he thought, but how many others like this were climbing up the cliff unseen? The captain found the eye of a soldier at the front of the spear wall.

"You," he said. "Go, and tell Captain Elpeth what you saw here. She has command."

The young man opened his mouth to protest, but Bernhardt would not argue and so ignored him.

"Volunteers," he called out. "Ten of you, with me. Let us give Keter its fucking *due*."

In front of them the abomination was spewing out its dead progeny, corpse after corpse forming a foothold, but ten brave souls came to his side. They used the old way, knowing full well what it meant. Three large urns of pitch, three torches, the rest to serve as the arrow in flight. The girl was one, that soldier with the errant red tuft.

"Go back, kid," he said. "Let another old hand take your torch."

Dark eyes met his.

"Hanne," she said, tone hard. "My name is Hanne, and I am *Lycaonese*."

The rebuke was hard as the voice. No older than his own Fredda, the captain thought. *What kinds of fathers were we, to raise daughters like these?* It was a bitter kind of pride, but pride nonetheless. Grip tight around his sword, Bernhard nodded.

"Steady then, Hanne," he rasped. "Remember that the flame is what matters."

She let out a shivering breath, nodding.

"Though mountains crack, and ice will thaw," Hanne said.

Bernhardt of Neustria let out a spout of laughter like a spasm and nodded, taking the lead. Behind him the volunteers fell into formation

"Though mountains crack, and ice will thaw," he called out.

Spears cracked down against the stone, a defiant snap.

"Though walls will fall, to tooth and claw," the captain screamed, voice rising.

Eleven against the assembling dead, and still they charged. Sword in hand Bernhardt hacked at the bronze-clad corpse before him, elbowing the dead aside and burying himself in their line. At his side the other swords fought like the mad, pushing in and knowing there would be no going back.

"Though stars will fade, and shadow spread," Bernhardt screamed, and they screamed with him.

Three of the volunteers were dead already, taken by axe and spear, but the dead had not expected so fierce an assault by so few and for a heartbeat he stood before the beasts' open maw with no foe before him. His sword he dropped, snatching a torch from one of his fallen instead and the girl, Hanne, pushed at his side even as he took an axe in the ribs. The gap in the enemy surprise had bought them was already closing.

"On the heights we stood, with iron red," she whispered, teeth clenched.

Torches were touched to pitch – one, two, three.

Into the beast they leapt, screaming defiance, and from the inside it burned.

The Hocheben Heights held halfway to dawn, and the surviving garrison retreated in good order.

Peers

"It was then I understood: it is a fundamental flaw in Creation that other people can disagree with me, and I must fix that mistake."

– Dread Emperor Imperious

The sack over his head was gently removed, which meant the hand was not the Saint's. Dear old Laurence liked to surprise him with the glare of daylight against his unprepared eyes, when she could, and Amadeus last remembered being spelled into slumber at evening time. As always, the former Black Knight took a languid moment to assess the state of his captivity: feet bound, chest bound but, to his surprise, though his hands were still bound they were no longer behind his back. Interesting. They'd never done this before.

"It is not a kind thing to say, but I've always found autumn in these parts to be a foul season," the Grey Pilgrim said.

Amadeus did not immediately reply. Their surroundings, he thought, were worth a second look. Under a gate of raised stones – three slabs of granite, the capstone supported by the other two almost incongruously large – he'd been propped up against one of the supports and arrayed so that he would be looking at an endless expanse of starry night. They were atop a hill or man-made barrow, he decided, for the sodden plains below were distant. If they were still in Iserre, which Amadeus suspected to be the case, then this should be one of the 'Mavian prayers' he'd read of: old Alamans tribal monuments many an Imperial scholar has suspected of being tied to the fae in some manner. Well, this was a pleasant surprise. He'd meant to have a look at one while he passed through the region, but the demands of the campaign had not allowed.

"It was always an interesting time, where I was born," Amadeus noted.

Autumn had been the last gasps of the war season, in the Green Stretch. Once upon a time that'd meant raiding parties from the Blessed Isle riding east under the banner of the White Hand, or

companies of miserable legionaries trudging down the old Miezian roads to their winter quarters facing the Wasaliti. His birthland's status as the granary of Praes meant its freeholders were under the protection of the Tower, and so spared many of the issues farmers and villagers would usually face when soldiers passed through their lands. That protection was no shield for the consequences of paladins and legionaries skirmishing in the region, though, or of the sharp rise in banditry that would often follow larger clashes between Callow and Praes. Still, for all the roving wolves on two feet Amadeus had much preferred autumn to spring. Soldiers, even deserters, could be bargained with. Not so the floods that followed broken levees, or the thick morasses of cloying mud they left behind. His family's freehold had not been so close to the river as to risk yearly flooding, but the scuttling and swarming vermin those disasters had brought had been just as dangerous in some ways.

"I'll confess no surprise to the revelation that Proceran weather suits you ill, however," he added.

Green eyes flicked down to the bemusing sight of the Grey Pilgrim stoking the flames of small fire but a few feet to the side, trying to prod wet logs into burning like dry ones. Cautiously positioned under the large granite capstone, the two of them along with that campfire would be safe from the rain Amadeus' damp clothes suggested had burdened their day.

"Don't get me wrong," the Pilgrim said, "the night sky around here is a wonder. It's the miserable, cold wetness of it I can't stand. Sinks into my bones, these days."

"I am told it will not snow even at the peak of winter, in most of Levant," Amadeus said, genuinely curious.

Most of the few books entirely dedicated to the region where the Dominion now stood dated back to the golden age of Praesi scholarship, under Dread Emperor Sorcerous. Which meant that while at least they accounted for the changes that'd followed the creation of the Titan's Pond by the strife between Triumphant and the Gigantes, they were also on average seven centuries old. More recent works were either pieced together from the accounts of traders or outright borrowed from foreign sources, such as the notoriously unreliable Proceran scholars.

"Not exactly," the old man laughed. "We'll get snowfall south of Tartessos, now and then, but it rarely lasts the day. Melts quickly. Once in a blue moon a blizzard will tumble down the slopes of the Titanomachy and the afterbirth will touch a shore of the Pond, but that is a much rarer occurrence."

"I'd never seen true snowfall before my first winter in Callow," Amadeus admitted. "It was quite jarring."

"Mine was in Orense," the Pilgrim fondly said. "I was pursuing this Arlesite warlock who'd cooked up a scheme to hold towns for ransom with this swarm of insects he'd enchanted to be full of diseases."

"I take it they were not enchanted to be cold-proof," the dark-haired man said, openly amused.

"Whole swarm died overnight," the Peregrine chuckled. "He tried to make the remains into some sort of disease-carrying monster, but I caught him halfway through the ritual."

"I was never impressed with the fibre of Proceran villainy," Amadeus noted. "Malicia and I looked into making alliance in the region, when it became clear the crusade was inevitable, but it was bare picking all around."

"There's a pirate on the Segovian coast, I believe," the Pilgrim said.

"The Ghastly Marauder," he agreed. "Wouldn't hear of taking either gold or information from the Tower, said it'd bring down either yourself or the Saint on his head. There was a promising sorceress in Tenerife, but the Tyrant had her captured and sealed in a barrel full of leeches."

The older man winced. For a hero who must have tried some rather nasty lairs over the years, he was still surprisingly tender-hearted. Amadeus himself had been inured to the sight of spiders eating people alive before he'd reached twenty. On the rare occasions when Nefarious remembered he was supposed to rule the Empire, he often had a few members of the Imperial court tossed into the arachnid pits and attendance had been, in a sense, mandatory – the Chancellor would pass along the names of any absent to the point the Emperor at them when he next felt like stabbing at shadows. No, after so many years in Praes the mere mention of a cruel method of execution would buy no reaction from him.

"That boy has a nasty streak even for a Theodosian," the Pilgrim sighed.

"Ours is an uncivil time," Amadeus replied, tone droll.

"Aren't they all?" the hero tiredly said.

Even as they conversed, the Duni continued to consider his situation. He could hear, in the distance, the sound of the rest of the party settling in a camp of their own. Given that he was currently atop a hill surrounded by water-logged plains, escape was unfeasible save if heavy rain started to fall. There was not even a drizzle, at the moment, though by the thick humidity of

the air Amadeus suspected it was only a matter of time until the autumn showers began anew.

"It is not my execution you intend," the green-eyed man calmly said. "If so, there would have been better occasions."

And it was unlikely the Grey Pilgrim himself would do the deed, Amadeus did not say, for when Catherine returned from her journey that might just lead to the Peregrine's skull splattered all over Proceran grounds. She was not particularly prone to mercy when cut deep, and while Amadeus was rather amused that he posed more threat to the Peregrine as a dead mentor to be avenged than a living former villain in the man's custody he doubted the hero was unaware of the fact. He might be, of course, which was why Amadeus had said nothing. If he was to be killed, it might as well be of some use.

"No," the Grey Pilgrim calmly said. "That is not what I intend."

Amadeus cocked his head to the side.

"Is this an attempt at redemption, then?" the Duni drawled.

"Truly, Tariq, I am flattered by the implicit compliment but—"

"I can see in you, Amadeus of the Green Stretch," the Peregrine softly interrupted. "Repentance is foreign to your nature, as it often is the worst of your kind. I would not waste either our hours on such a fool's errand."

He cocked an eyebrow.

"Then what, exactly, is your purpose?" Amadeus asked, honestly puzzled.

"You are one of the oldest living villains on Calernia," the Pilgrim said.

Alaya was older than he by a year and eight months, the Duni thought, and Hye by a great deal more than that — though it would be an oversimplification to call Hye Su truly one of Below's, in his humble opinion. It seemed, Amadeus thought, that the Pilgrim was in fact correct. Every other villain he knew of was younger than him by either years or decades.

"So I am," Amadeus said. "Though that was an observation and not an answer."

"Come dawn, Laurence is going to sever your soul from your earthly coil," the Pilgrim calmly said. "What will follow that, you need not know, but I will say that this may very well be the last time we will ever speak."

The Duni's eyebrow arched.

"Alas, and our acquaintance had barely begun," he replied.

"In a way, this could be called a vigil," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Yet I will confess to more selfish motive – you are, perhaps, the closest equivalent to a peer I have in the service of the Gods Below. It would be a waste, to never speak more than a handful of sentences to you."

Amadeus cocked his head to the side, thinking of the last conversation he'd ever had with Ranker. A Marshal of the Legions of Terror, true, but that was almost the least of what she had been to him. And the last he'd ever seen of her was as a gasping, bloody ruin on a sickbed through an unsteady scrying mirror. The man who'd birthed the plague that took her, that took the two thousand soldiers Amadeus had led into the trap only he had been deemed *fit* to survive, was now addressing him like the thin pretence of civility between them was anything but that. A pretence. *If you can see in me, Pilgrim, can you glimpse the thoroughness of the extinction I will visit upon you given chance?* The man who had been the Black Knight smiled, affably, and the sight of the other man's eyes tightening was the only answer he needed.

"By all means, Pilgrim. I am your captive audience," Amadeus said.

"The others will not-"

"How like a hero," the dark-haired man casually interrupted, "to first name me a peer and then proceed to treat me the simpleton."

There was no apology in him for the sharpness of his tone. The Peregrine and his delightful right hand the Lady de Montfort had spent this entire journey keeping him away from the younger members of their band, there had never been any question of any of them now being in attendance for this indulgence of the Pilgrim's. The man in grey robes wryly smiled.

"Not unearned," he conceded. "I assume that there will be terms, Carrion Lord?"

"I am hardly that anymore," Amadeus amusedly replied. "I offer you the fairest terms I know, Pilgrim: a question for a question."

"That is civil of you," the older man replied without a hint of irony.

Amadeus made himself think of taking in hand a stone and smashing it against the Peregrine's skull until it burst open like an overripe fruit. He considered the matter vividly, seeing to every detail, and then smiled amicably at the hero.

"That," Tariq said, "was a great deal less civil."

"Your turn," Amadeus replied.

Though these days his body was a simple sack of meat with infuriatingly feeble senses, the Duni had been careful to watch for any use of Light or artefact and caught sight of nothing. Which meant this little trick of the hero's was either an aspect or a gift from Above. At the very least, it did not seem to be outright mind or memory reading. Perhaps a particularly discerning sort of empathy, Amadeus considered, though given the man's age, breadth of travel and ties to a Choir it might be something more exotic or outright unheard of.

"I am told," the Pilgrim said, "that you are an intelligent man, and prize reason."

Amadeus' lips quirked in dry amusement.

"Intelligence is simple memory and cleverness, neither of which are half so glorified on their own," he replied. "It should be no different with the pairing of them."

"But the prizing of reason you do not deny," the Peregrine stated.

"Insofar as the application of it is useful," Amadeus acknowledged.

"Then, to be a villain and so cast your lot with them, you must believe in the teachings of the Gods Below," the older man replied. "What it is, I ask, that you find of worth in them?"

The dark-haired prisoner laughed.

"Simply by asking that question, you have already failed in what you seek to accomplish," he said.

The Peregrine's brow creased, but he did not grow irritated with the answer. He would be, Amadeus suspected, a particularly boring man to needle. The Saint was much more entertaining in that regard.

"I do not understand," Tariq admitted.

"You consider Below as if it were simply a wicked mirror of Above, and seek to understand it by terms it fundamentally does not recognize," Amadeus said. "Considering the differences in how Named of our respective... sympathies form, I suppose that is an excusable mistake but it is one that precludes ever gaining perspective on the matter."

"You are a villain," the Pilgrim slowly said. "You are, therefore, a champion of Below. What is it that you champion?"

They both knew Amadeus to be Nameless, though the Duni suspected that was considered a minor detail compared to his decades as the Black Knight.

"You have put your finger on the crux of the matter," he said. "As a mortal you championed the ideals of Above – or at least some middling section of them – and fit a particular grove, which as a consequence saw you bestowed power as a blessing to further that cause."

"A gross oversimplification," the Pilgrim soberly replied. "Though technically not incorrect."

"I was – am, I suppose – a villain," Amadeus said. "And as a mortal, by acquiring power I became worthy of blessing. That is the fundamental difference between your kind and mine, Pilgrim: your Name was a coronation while mine was a confirmation."

"You argue, then, that the only teaching of Below is the acquisition of power," the other man said.

"Teaching," the prisoner sighed. "You speak the word anew as if repetition will make the saddle fit the beast. There are no teachings, Pilgrim, that is the point exact. The exercise of power, of will, is not *given* meaning. It must be ascribed. That has led to some rather unusual or horrifying uses, I'll concede, but in my eyes that is more a reflection of human nature than of Below's."

"You would absolve your Gods of guilt?" Tariq said, sounding surprised.

"You would absolve humanity of responsibility?" Amadeus asked, scornful. "The deferral of consequence to higher power is the deepest form of moral cowardice conceivable. Even your precious Book agrees, Pilgrim – we have a *choice*."

"And knowing this, you still choose to commit evil," the Grey Pilgrim said.

"And there we reach impasse once more," he noted. "For you seem to consider some form of goodness our natural state, and so committing an evil a willful deviation from that state. I find such a notion utterly repugnant."

"Are we born evil, then and only taught to be good?" Tariq pressed.

Amadeus felt a sliver of irritation and willfully curbed his tongue, knowing this lack of sympathy for slow students was one of the reasons he was particularly ill-suited to teaching.

"We are born nothing, and taught a set of... rules for a lack of better term, that allow us to determine what is acceptable behaviour and what is not," the prisoner said. "What irks me, Pilgrim, is your insistence that these rules are a set of virtues inherent to the fabric Creation instead of covenant between mortals for mortal purposes."

"Your conception of Creation," the Pilgrim said, "is utterly barren of morality. It is without principle, without faith, without a single ounce of justice. Is it, in a word, *dirt*."

Amadeus had no intention of engaging on the matter of justice – the last time he'd ventured an argument on the subject, the Seraphim had slapped him down through a paved street and left him to bleed to death.

"Indeed," he casually agreed, unwilling to pursue the debate that if any of the things the Pilgrim had named were inherent instead of ascribed, they became utterly meaningless. "Now, I do believe I am owed quite the question given how your own has considerably strayed."

"So it has," the Pilgrim amicably conceded.

"I have made a study of you," Amadeus said. "And though you've left mostly rumour behind I believe you've operated in southern Calernia, as well as the upper reaches of the Principate, for more than forty years. You came into your Name before Dread Emperor Nefarious claimed the Tower."

"More than forty years is accurate," the Peregrine drily said.

"In that span of time," the prisoner casually said, "did any villain in those regions achieve particular prominence?"

The Pilgrim cocked his head to the side, considering the matter.

"The Barrow Lord threatened to take the northern half of Levant for the better part of a summer," he said. "The Princess of Cantal was murdered and then impersonated by the Face-Thief for half a year before they were caught."

"In summation, the highest peak was a secret victory that did not even last a year?" Amadeus asked.

"Arguably," Tariq agreed.

"Interesting," he murmured. "My thanks."

The Pilgrim frowned.

"Why did you ask?" he said.

"Merely a theory of mine," Amadeus said.

He knew the hero would glimpse in him the intent to wound, yet also that it was no less true for it. Curiosity, he thought, would do the rest.

"And that theory is?" the Pilgrim patiently asked.

"That you, and to a lesser extent the Saint of Swords, are at least partly responsible the current invasion of the Dead King," Amadeus said.

The older man stared at him unblinking, for it was not the dark-haired man's body that would be of interest but whatever sight he used to truthtell. The prisoner smiled, discerning the very moment the Grey Pilgrim realized there was not so much as a hint of a lie. His face went ashen.

"Why?" the Levantine croaked.

"You have been a singularly effective agent for Good in broad and your Choir in particular," Amadeus said. "To the extent that you've just admitted to me that for a span of at least forty years you effectively snuffed out effective villain in over half of Calernia. Did you truly think, Tariq, that this would go without *consequence*?"

"The Hidden Horror has ignored longer stretches of peace in the past," the Pilgrim said. "And Praes achieved resurgence."

"So it did, in a manner of speaking," Amadeus noted. "It was the only Calernian surface region where you and the Saint weren't active, after all. Though, of course, as soon as the civil war in Procer ended the Tenth Crusade was declared and the last major active Evil polity on Calernia risked being ended. Perhaps permanently, given the lessons of the last crusader occupation of the Wasteland."

"Callow could not be allowed to be consumed, Carrion Lord," the hero harshly said. "All that suffering was brought by the very Conquest you led."

"It must be infuriating, to realize that sometimes the balance swings the other way," the villain smiled. "That victory can be perilous for your side as well."

The Peregrine's hands tightened.

"I could be wrong, of course," the prisoner said. "It is only a theory, though one informed by facts and my decades of experience as a villain."

"You could have kept this up your sleeve," Tariq said. "Is that not your way? Secrets hoarded until they can be used?"

"Her name," Amadeus mildly said, "was Ranker of the Hungry Dog tribe. She was a vicious and mistrusting and often unpleasant, but she was also my friend. I loved her, you see, in my own crooked way. And she died choking on her own blood from your plague."

"She was a soldier," the Grey Pilgrim said.

"She was," he agreed. "And so I do not cry of unfairness. And yet."

The prisoner leaned forward, green eyes glimmering with something cold and hateful and utterly patient.

"So sleep well, Tariq Fleet-foot, wondering what *utter ruin* your good intentions might have wrought," Amadeus hissed. "For I loved her nonetheless, and she is dead by your hand."

Miraculous

"Courage is what's left when the rest is gone."

– Albrecht Papenheim, the Lone Sentinel

Captain Fredda squared her shoulders as she strode up the stairs leading to the summit of the Westenhaupt, her cloak tightly clasped at the neck over her grandfather's mail. She was glad for the way the cloth over her lower face hid her mouth, lest the soldiers she had been placed in command of see her biting at her lip. Though the responsibilities of command were fresh to her, and she young for them, they were not the source of her worries. She could handle leading a company, on the wall or off it. No, it was the ringing bells that were summoning her to the top of the ramparts that had her uneasy. Her soldiers should have been given six hours of rest in the depths of the Westenhaupt, where no dead could get to them and not even the constant pounding of the Enemy's mages could keep them wake, yet they'd only had four before being called back to the rampart. Father, who had been a well-known captain back home for all that he'd insisted he was a terrible innkeeper when she'd been a child, had always told her that you could tell a siege was going bad when they sent tired soldiers back into the fray. Her father who might be dead, for there were rumours going around about Hocheben Heights... No, she could not let fear win. It might be, Fredda told herself, that was seeing ratlings instead of hares. But it also might be that her father had been right, instead, and that the Morgentor was on the eve of falling.

Morgentor – Morning's Gate, the last fortress barring the way out of Twilight's Pass. The last fortress the armies of the north still held in the face of the Enemy, for inch by inch they had lost the grounds. We'll hold, Fredda chided herself. *The Morgentor hasn't fallen since the founding of Procer.* Had her

mother not been a scribe, the fair-haired captain might not have known that the last time the fortress had fallen was the last time the Hidden Horror had invaded the north. As it was, the fond learning of her childhood was the dread of her later years.

"Blades out," Fredda howled, glancing back at the soldiers following her. "They don't ring the bells to make it lively."

"Where else are we supposed to earn a tune, captain?" one of her soldiers yelled back.

"Certainly not your singing, Hannah, or the Dead King would run back to Keter in fright," Fredda called out, and the lot of them hit the rampart to the sound of hard laughter.

The dead had forced a foothold, damn them all and Keter twice. A wyrm's great fangs had sunk into the crenellation and the gargantuan dead serpent's open maw was now spewing out an endless stream of enemy soldiers. Westenhaupt, the westernmost of the Three Peaks, was held by the soldiers of Neustria with reinforcements from those hard Hannover bastards when the going got rough. There was no lack of soldiers, but Princess Mathilda Greensteel was fighting the dead in Hainaut so the Neustrians had few of the old blood to rally around. It didn't help, that the finest soldiers and officers had gone south. But they'd earn the fucking keep, and if the Morgentor was to fall it would not be through their peak.

"Shield wall," Captain Fredda screamed, raising her own.

Her company fell around her and they advanced briskly into the melee, smashing into the side of the dead. The fair-haired captain hacked down with her axe, tearing through dead flesh and smashing old bones, and as she howled her soldiers howled with her. Inch by inch they forced back the dead, until the melee was so tightly packed there was no room for the enemy trying to climb out.

"Where are the godsdamned burners?" Captain Fredda screamed. "Get that fucking wyrm off my wall."

Before everyone here dies, she didn't say. Were they out of pitch, she wondered for a horrible moment? It couldn't be, how else were they to get ride of abominations like the wyrms? But then screams of *Papenheim, Papenheim*, and yet *we stand* sounded and flames spread across the dead serpent's flesh. If custom hold, it would retreat now – the Enemy only had so many of those undead moving siege towers, and could not afford to lose them.

Instead, the head of the soldier to Fredda's side disappeared into red mist. *Fuck*, the flaxen-haired captain thought.

"Chosen," she yelled. "Torch the stretch."

It'd kill her and half her company, but if one of the enemy's undead heroes was allowed to linger up here they were all done for. She's seen one shred near two hundred Hannoven heavies three nights back before it was thrown down the wall. The Enemy's champion was a half-naked man, a mass of hard muscle wearing little but trousers and scarring, and even though she raised her shield he smashed through it effortlessly and grabbed her by the throat.

"*Audace*," someone screamed in Chantant, and the lance caught the Chosen in the throat.

Falling to the floor, Fredda wondered if she was dreaming. There wasn't a man or woman in the army who didn't know who Prince Frederic Goethal was – the sole southerner prince to bring his army to fight for the Pass – but the fluttering hundreds of horsemen in red and blue silk couldn't possibly be here, could they? They held the Ostenhaupt, the tower on the other side of the Three Peaks. The dead Chosen vaulted up, even with his neck torn through, and after punching right through the head of the horseman who'd ridden him down he was run through by another three lances in quick succession, pushing him further back. Until the last had him dangling over the edge of the ramparts, and a ridiculously ostentatious man with long curls held by ribbons laughed out loud.

"Enjoy the drop, yes?" Prince Frederic Goethal said, and with his sword hacked through the lance holding up the Damned.

Captain Fredda had risen to her feet, by then and gotten her shield wall back in order. The wyrm's fangs left stone soon enough, and it slithered back down the four hundred feet it had extended to serve as a siege tower. With the Westenhaupt secured and no other captain coming forward to do so in her place, Fredda ambled forward to speak with the Prince of Brus herself. He was still atop his mount, though someone appeared to have handed him a fine glass of brandy since she'd last looked.

"Your Grace," she greeted him, and the respect was not feigned.

How could it be, when the Kingfisher Prince and his army had bled for every fortress from Volsaga to Morgentor? This would be remembered. There were Alamans, in the end, and there were *Alamans*. The man might look a fool, in silk and ribbons, but he was a fool who'd ridden down a sheer cliff to slay an undead dragon. Even the bitterest of Hannoven exiles had to approve of that.

"Captain Fredda, yes?" the Prince of Brus smiled.

The fair-haired captain was glad the cloth still hid her face, for if she'd been caught blushing by any of her soldiers she'd have heard about it until Last Dusk.

"Aye," she gruffly said. "I thank you for your help, it was a close thing."

"It was you Neustrians who sortied at Graueletter to pull us out of that mess with the beorns," the Prince of Brus replied. "An even scale requires no thanks, captain. This was *due*."

None of this is due, she almost said. *You could be safe south, but instead you're here dying with the rest of us.* But she'd been raised better than to insult sacrifice when it was so gallantly given, and so she kept her mouth shut.

"Then I look forward to returning the favour," she simply said.

The prince smiled ruefully.

"I expect you'll get the occasion before long," he said. "The Enemy seems rather impatient of late."

Fredda almost didn't ask, for it was overstepping, but when else would she get such an occasion?

"Your Grace," she hesitantly said. "I have heard that the Hocheben Heights have fallen. Is it true?"

The Alamans gazed at her steadily.

"Why do you ask?" he said.

"My father held command at Emil's Displeasure," she admitted. "And I know that letters are no longer carried, but it has been weeks since I've heard from him."

Something like grief passed through the Prince of Brus' eyes.

"I'm sorry," he quietly said. "They held until dawn and got word to Tauenberg in time."

Fredda's throat choked. Then Father was...

"Thank you," she croaked out.

Her fists clenched. The Morgentor would hold, damn them all and Keter twice. Her father had died for it, and if that was what it took she fucking would too.

—

Otto Redcrown, Prince of Bremen by virtue of having been spared by death longer than the rest of his kin, stared down at ink on parchment and saw writ there the death of his people. It might take, he thought, a year. Two, perhaps, if the Enemy spent months thoroughly razing the lowlands of Bremen and Neustria rather than forcing the Rhenian Gates. Yet the moment the fortress around him

fell, and Twilight's Pass with it, the last doom of the Lycaonese had come. They'd lost Hocheben Heights, last month, and the Dead King had since begun to march hordes through the plateau. The fortress at Tauenberg would slow them down a few weeks, he thought, for but after that the dead would have no wall or host hindering their advance into the heartlands of the principality his father and sisters had entrusted to his unworthy hands. Within the month they would be at the gates of the city of Bremen itself, which was in no state to withstand a siege: it was packed with children and the elderly, all those that could or would not fight. Already the roads south had been cleared and all were being sent further south into Neustria, but once the dead had their foothold in Bremen they would begin raiding the refugee caravans and the noose would begin to tighten. The Dead King had moved too swiftly for them, Otto Reitzenberg thought, his armies little quicker on the march than those of the living but ceaseless and tireless in that advance.

Now only a single fortress of Twilight's Pass remained in the hands of his people: the ancient Morning's Gate, the last holdfast standing against the march of doom. And if it fell... Oh, Otto understood the stratagem of the Hidden Horror well. It was writ plain in the lay of the map: the last armies of the Lycaonese would be driven from the Morgentor and find in their retreat that the Dead King's armies were already waiting to the south of them. Supplies would end, the wagon-chains of grain and steel, and even should force of arms fail to end his armies hunger and winter cold would slay his soldiers by the score until none were left. The war was lost, though he could not admit it to the captains looking to him for orders. He must now see to preserving as much of his people as he could, sending them further south into Alamans lands so that a generation from now the war could be taken back to the Dead King and their ancestral holdings reclaimed. Neustria too would fall, of that there could be no question, but further south where the borders of Brus and Lyonis ran close it might be that Lake Pavin and the marshlands of northern Brus could serve as a new line of defence. They were Alamans holdings, as well, and would have many kin to call to their aid when the dead arrived. It might be enough for a time, if anything could ever be enough when facing the Hidden Horror.

The sharp rap of a knuckle against wood was the sole warning Otto received before his sworn swords let in the man he'd asked for. Prince Frederic Goethal of Brus was still impeccable dressed and groomed even after two weeks of gruelling fighting on the walls and the plains, his ostentatious blond ringlets kept with ribbons made from cloth he'd taken from banners of the Dead King. The Kingfishers, as the prince's retinue of horsemen had been fondly named by their Lycaonese comrades, had taken to taking the Hidden Horror's banners at every opportunity so they might have a courtly game of the most insulting use one could make of it.

"Reitzenberg," the other prince cheerfully greeted him. "Back staring at the maps, I see. Good, I've been itching for us to try a sortie."

"That is what I would ask you to consider, in a manner of speaking," Otto acknowledged.

The blond man seemed pleased.

"If you'd lend me some of the Hannover riders, I do believe we could catch their camp near the mountain rivers unaware," Prince Frederic said. "The waters are already poisoned, I daresay, but we'll have better luck there than trying the Abomination's frontlines. Last watch insists they brought in fresh Damned and another pair of wyrms."

The Chosen dead and raised in the service of the Enemy had been leading the waves trying the walls for days now, though smashing through the ladders before they finished climbing was enough to keep most of them at bay. The wyrms were darker news, for the great serpents the Hidden Horror had crafted from corpses were worse than simple monsters: they were as undead siege towers, their insides made ladders so that the dead could climb up through them after the wyrms sunk their fangs into stone deep enough nothing could move them. Pitch fires were enough to set them to retreat, sometimes, but supplies were running low and more wyrms meant further thinning of them. They might have even less time than he'd hoped before the walls fell.

"I would have you ride in another direction," the Prince of Bremen said. "Now, before it is too late. Take forty thousand with you, and all our horse. Delay the enemy near Tauenberg, if you can, but you must take everyone you can south."

"Otto," the other prince said.

"It is ill-done of me to ask after the sacrifices you have made," the Prince of Bremen admitted, "but if you could let them into Brus, all who can will fight in its defence. If oaths must be made to you in place of the old crowns, then they will be. I have seen to it."

"Otto," Prince Frederic sharply said.

"I'll hold as long as I can," he promised. "And send word to the Rhenians to march everything they can through the Gates to slow the Enemy's march south. A month, at least, I can promise. Beyond that--"

"If you speak another word of this foolishness, Gods forgive me but we may have to duel," Frederic Goethal flatly said.

"We're going to die, Frederic," Otto Redcrown quietly said. "There's too many of them and even the Morgentor cannot hold forever. Thrice in two days did we come within a hair's breadth of losing one of the Three Peaks, and the moment we do our annihilation has begin. Go while you still can and take the seed of my people with you, so that one day the Lycaonese may return north."

"Of course we're going to die, Otto," the other man replied, tone gentle. "This is no surprise to me. My cousin Henriette has already been confirmed as my successor and I've tasked her with preparing our lands. What remains of the Goethal army will advance north into the marshlands to raise forts and escort your people to safety."

"It won't be enough," the Prince of Bremen said. "You are held in respect, Frederic, in a manner that will not extend to your cousin. A prince needs to lead the last of us."

"Then go," Prince Frederic languidly shrugged. "You, too, have been crowned."

"I am the last of the House of Reitzenberg," Otto Redcrown said, in a tone that brooked no argument. "So long as one of us breathes, dawn will hold."

Of that matter there was nothing more to say, for Twilight's Pass would be his grave as it had been that of greater men.

"I do not begrudge you that pride, my friend," Frederic Goethal said. "Do not begrudge me the same."

It was not the same, Otto thought. It was not the same, but he did not know the right words to speak and he would fail in this as he had been failing since the moment Elsa had pressed her bloody crown into his hand and breathed her last. Yet before he could say anything more, the door was roughly banged against.

"Your Graces! The enemy stirs!"

The two princes traded a glance, and wordless agreed to set aside the matter for now. If there was to be another assault on the walls there were more pressing concerns to attend to. Neither of them left their arms or armour save when they slept, these days, though attendants brought helmets to them as well as reports as they both made for the ramparts. The Morgentor had first been raised in the days of the Iron Kings, after the third time Hannover fell and a ratling warband swelled into horde swarmed down Twilight's Pass looking for yet more to devour. The Rhenian Gates had held, as they always did, so with the way north into Rhenia barred the ratlings had ended up heading south towards Bremen like a tide of vermin. The battle for the lower mouth of Twilight's Pass was great victory, but a costly one. When one of

the Krauff – who had ruled over Bremen, in those days, predecessors to the Reitzenberg – was elected Iron King in the years that followed, he ordered the raising of the Morgentor to ensure when the Chain of Hunger next broke through there would be walls awaiting them. In the centuries that'd followed, every great against the Dead and the Plague had seen it built into a greater holdfast. There was no greater fortress in the north, it was said, save for the cities of Hannoven and Rhenia themselves. That was no idle boast, Otto know, for otherwise he would not have been able to hold at bay the more five hundred thousand dead the Hidden Horror sent against the walls day and night.

The Three Peaks had begun as the two great towers leaning against the sides of the pass, the third one originally raised as a simple bastion before centuries of additions turned it into a massive mountain of granite masonry. The walls between the three towers rose higher and thicker with the passing years, until it seemed like peaks made by the hands of mortals had filled the mouth of Twilight's Pass. The great gates that allowed armies and merchants to pass through were layers upon layers of enchanted steel, raised in times of peace but now fully closed since all to the north had been lost. Tunnels dug into the mountainside allowed for sorties from hidden places, though each had been built to it could be collapsed on the enemy if they found it. Otto himself had been commanding from the central peak, which was held mostly by Bremen soldiery. Prince Frederic's army held the eastern peak, while the Neustrians held the western one and the Hannoven exiles served as reserve and reinforcements for all. It was at the heart of the middle peak that Otto had set his quarters, and it would be swifter for the Prince of Brus to rise to the top of the tower and head east from there than to descend all the way down before doing the same – as such, it was together that they reached the summit of the Herzhaupt and came to gaze down at the Dead King's sea of dead.

"That is not an assault, unless I am gravely mistaken," Prince Frederic said, frowning.

Otto did not disagree. The armies of the dead had made their camp further north, among the ruins of Graueletter, where their sorcerers were less vulnerable to sorties. Not without reason. The Lycaonese had proved more than willing to trade dozens of lives, if not entire companies, for the destruction of corpse-mages since the beginning of this war. It was known from ancient lore that the Dead King could not easily replace these, and that many of his foulest rituals required their presence. The Prince of Bremen had been forced to halt the practice of late, as he could no longer afford such losses no matter the prize, but the dead had remained cautious anyway. Close to the Morgentor they had only raised forts and filled them with tireless watchers: the river poured forth only when the ramparts were tried, be that day or night. What had at first been constant bruising assaults –

some of them having lasted more than a day and night in length – had since slowed in frequency, though none wise would believe that to be good omen. Yet for all that the armies of the dead had come out of the ruins to the north, none of them had advanced further than the outer forts. Among the seemingly endless ranks of corpses garbed in ancient armour, there lay greater abominations.

The wyrms, foul serpents that were monster and siege tower both. The beorns, bear-like monsters that served as the first wave of assault by climbing the ramparts and spewing out a company's worth of dead to aid their own rampage while ladders and wyrms advanced. Flocks of long-dead drakes circled above, waiting to spew their clouds of poison and acid. And among the lesser soldiers, ready to lead the dead hordes that would attempt to land their iron ladders on the ramparts, Chosen slain and raised into damnation stood still as statues. More than a dozen times now had Otto driven back that host when it tried to take the Morgentor, yet gazing upon it still sent a shiver up his spine every time. It was an army, he'd thought, raised to be the end of Calernia. And ahead of those dark ranks, a company of riders had approached under ancient banner: a circle of silver stars around a pale crown, the Hidden Horror's own heraldry. The riders bared their blades and raised them blades in salute, high and shining in the morning sun.

And then they left, and the army went with them. Not a word had been spoken, from beginning to end.

"What is this?" Prince Fredric softly asked.

"A miracle, my friend," Prince Otto replied in a hushed whisper. "Gods save us all, it is a miracle."

The dead withdrew all the way back to Graueletter and for three months took not a single step forward.

Seed I

"In declaring all that is not Good to be Evil, one surrenders the better part of the world to the Enemy."

– Theodore Langman, Wizard of the West

The librarians were skulking about again.

Amadeus was going to have to kill a few before this was done and over with, he suspected, which would have been trouble if Dread Emperor Nefarious still took interest in anything but his seraglio and his grimoires. The Deep Library, as the misshapen people of this place called the true Imperial archives – those hidden deep beneath the Tower, where none without permission could enter – was purely the Emperor's to oversee. It'd been

that was since it had grown from a tomb full of secrets to one of the greatest repositories of knowledge on Calernia, in the days where Dread Emperor Sorcerous had reigned and learning had flourished in Praes like never before. The Deep Library was as a small city, now, those that saw to its obscure labyrinthine stacks and records born and raised within the depths. Few had ever seen the light of day, and centuries of inbreeding and exposure to old sorceries had warped them in... unseemly ways. They wore the hoods by imperial decree, as some ancient Tyrant having been disgusted by their appearance. For all that they'd made clear their disapproval of a mere *Duni* like Amadeus being granted access to the stacks even if he'd come with a writ bearing Nefarious' own seal. It'd been the Chancellor's hand that'd pressed it down, truth be told, but the rats scuttling in these deeps had no way of knowing that.

"I can hear you," the Black Knight calmly said. "Come into the light or be treated as a spy."

The Chancellor no doubt had suborned a few eyes among this lot and tasked them with study of what it was *he* was studying, but he'd hardly be the only one. The old families of the Wasteland would have agents of their own, entire bloodlines of traitors cultivated over centuries whose practical worth was greater than that of a vault full of rubies. The ring of flickering lights cast by oil lanterns – mage lights would have been more efficient but they tended to go wild in these parts, affected by the ancient wards and magics – revealed the yellow-robed silhouette of a lesser librarian. To a guest bearing a seal, like Amadeus, they were to be ordered about as wished though it was customary to allow one of the greater librarians to see to it instead, expressing wishes to the greater so that they could send the lesser to carry them out. Of course, that would require one of the greater librarians to have remained in attendance of the Black Knight as was also customary instead of vanishing back into the dark maze. A distasteful parting shot had been made about getting mud on the scrolls, for which Amadeus had considered taking the woman's tongue as a warning to the others. He'd decided against it, for now anyway. There were yet more ways in which the keepers of this place could hinder his research, which was too important to risk on what was hardly likely to be the last reference to his breeding he'd hear.

"This one has what was sought, Lord Black," a mellifluous voice spoke from under the hood.

The Mtehwā spoken had an archaic bent to it, for those speaking it had been separated from other speakers for so long they'd not changed their manners along the same lines. The court address was properly done, though still unfamiliar to his ear: highborn had only begun using such courtesies with him since he'd slain the Heir and put a permanent end to their struggles.

"The Thalassinan records, yes?" he questioned.

"It is so, Lord," the librarian agreed.

He gestured for the yellow-robed stranger to approach. Stuttering steps brought the tablets he'd sent for, and Amadeus allowed the librarian to set them on one of the rare corners of the reading hall he'd claimed that wasn't covered. It looked like utter chaos, at first glance, piles of scrolls and manuscripts and stone inscriptions sprawling under ancient maps of Praes and eastern Callow. The divisions were not geographic, in truth, but chronological. Inconveniently enough, he'd had to spend longer finding the right time and place in histories to look for answers than actually finding the answers he sought. The seal that'd allowed him access to the Deep Library had been a reward claimed from the Chancellor, but it was not without bounds: he had only seven days and nights to seek his answers. He'd not slept more than two hours apiece in the last five days, and if Amadeus could have avoided that without measurably impairing his mind's ability to retain details he would have done so. There was no telling when he would next have such an opportunity.

"If this one may speak, Lord," the librarian said.

Black's eyes flicked up in surprise. He'd expected them to leave as soon as the precise duties were discharged.

"It may be presumptuous of this one to grasp at the intent of one of hallowed rank, yet it seems that it might be grain quantities in particular being sought," the librarian delicately said.

"That is correct," Amadeus said. "Under the tenure of Rector Cornelia Orbivia, to be specific."

Which had been irritatingly difficult to find out with any degree of accuracy. The Miezens had famously put everything to writing and what remained of the records of their occupation was surprisingly extensive, but Praes had been one of the most distant overseas provinces of their empire. Which meant that, far from the stern gaze of their imperial rulers, the rectors overseeing Praes had been habitually corrupt and falsified the reports they sent to Mieza in order to better enrich themselves off imperial revenue. Cornelia Orbivia had been unusually corrupt even among rectors, to the extent that Amadeus had found himself reluctantly impressed by her gall. On the same year where Taghreb tribal record of the Banu Hiraq spoke of several large gold shafts being mined in the Grey Eyries, she'd had the gall to send envoys to Mieza requesting funding for the rebuilding of the Wasaliti levees that she otherwise 'could not afford'. As a nice touch, she'd even mentioned that failing to repair those works would agitate the local savages. Amusing as that had been to find out, Rector Cornelia's falsifications made it difficult to assess what the yield of fields under her rule had actually been. Which

was unfortunate, for under her successor the Miezens had begun trading regularly with the Callowan chieftains of Summerholm and that influx of grain would throw off the numbers in a way Amadeus couldn't really account for.

"The harbour records of Thalassina would only provide incomplete understanding, Lord," the librarian said, "as they do not account for ships that were exempt from duties and inspections by Rector's decree. This one presumed to send for the records of such exempted ships, if it pleases the hallowed one."

"It does," Black replied, eyes narrowing by the barest of fractions. "Yet are you implying that Rector Orbivia kept *records* of her own corruption?"

"Hallowed one, they are in fact from the array of charges brought against her by Imperatrix Iusta," the librarian said. "Who later recalled Rector Orbivia and had her drawn and quartered after public trial."

More than once, perusing Miezen histories, it had occurred to Amadeus that the Praesi apple had not fallen far from the tree.

"Those charges would be accurate, in your opinion?" he asked, cocking his head to the side.

"This one recalls the Imperatrix was reputed for her preoccupation for justice," the librarian said. "Yet the hallowed one need not take this one's recollections as facts, for such is mentioned in the *Annales Zosimia* and the *Sicorat Aheli*."

Amadeus' brow rose. The famous historian Zosimia had been prone to embellishing when the truth of things proved insufficiently exciting for the audience, but as a rule they'd been faithful in relating what more reliable and unfortunately lost histories had believed to be the truth. The Sicorat, on the other hand, was not a Miezen history but a Baalite one. Amadeus' passing knowledge of tradertalk had him suspecting the meaning of the title was something along the lines of 'Foe-Tale', which was an apt summation of the relations between the Hegemony and the Empire during their shared span of history. That rather added integrity to the source, in his eyes. Invectives from an enemy ever flowed freely, but praise? That was a rarer thing, and grudgingly given.

"Have the *Annales Zosimia* sent to me," he ordered. "Do you have a translation of the Sicorat from I assume to be the original High Tyrian?"

"This one knows only of a highly revisionist reinterpretation of the work penned by High Lord Saman Muraqib during the reign of the Dread Empress Maleficent the Second," the librarian replied. "It does contain several accurate translations of the Sicorat Aheli's text, spread among High Lord Saman's own writing."

The Black Knight almost snorted. Considering the second Maleficent had clashed more than once with the Thalassocracy of Ashur in her day and that the islanders were the last remnants of Baalite rule on Calernia it was no great stretch to infer the nature of the Taghreb aristocrat's commentary. The man would hardly be the first of the Wasteland's highborn to rail at the Ashuran 'perfidy' in not allowing Praes to raise a fleet worth the name. He would not even be the first to frame Praes as the inheritor of Mieza and Ashur that of the Hegemony, poetically fated to war as their progenitors had been.

"My palate might not be discerning enough to truly understand the depths of High Lord Saman's wisdom," Amadeus drily said. "His work shall rest, I think."

"By your will, hallowed one," the librarian said, bowing.

The Black Knight hummed and considered matters for long moment. Weighing risk, weighing dues.

"Your name?" he asked.

"This one is called Nafari, hallowed one," the librarian replied.

"After arranging for the Annales," Amadeus said, "I believe you will find your duties take you far from this part of the stacks. For some time, too."

The hooded librarian stiffened.

"It will be so, hallowed one," Nafari croaked out. "Manifold thanks from this unworthy one."

Amadeus did not further acknowledge the exchange, unwilling to tip his hand too deeply. This one had been helpful, and polite. The slight risk could be taken as gratitude. It was forgot before long, for the promised records had arrived and so he returned to his calculations. To his surprise, though Rector Orbivia had smuggled out the wealth she'd stolen from imperial revenues at a rate of between five to eight ships a year, a significant part of that theft was grain. The quantities allowed him to add the last finishing touch to his estimates of grain yields, yet the detail remained in the back of his mind like a wiggling tick. Rector Orbivia had been nothing if not apt in extracting wealth from her office, Amadeus thought. Why, then would on a year where she had sent six ships sailing to Liceria would a full three of them have been filled with grain? The same hull filled with slaves, for example – orcs had been rare on the other side of the Tyrian Sea and wildly popular, fetching high prices on Miezan slave auctions – should have secured much greater profit. Had grain been easier to obtain, in those days? It was possible, for the Wasteland had not yet earned its name through Sinistra's cataclysmic blunder. Yet agriculture had grown more sophisticated since those days,

and the crops reaped relative to the amount of cultivated land had been numerically higher in those days.

Something was beginning to dawn on him, slowly, as he kept open his leather journal with his lower palm and marked in ink the numbers for Rector Orbivia's tenure.

Yet it would have been absurd, when Praes held so many other ways for a Miezan rector to enrich themselves, unless he was missing a detail. The Annales Zosimia were brought to him, all seven volumes, by another yellow-robed librarian. This one did not speak nor linger, and Black dug throughout the fourth tome until he acceded to the parts concerning Imperatrix Iusta. It was easy enough to confirm Librarian Nafari's words, namely that the Imperatrix seemed to have displayed a very real concern for justice even when it was politically inconvenient for her. Yet it was not those sentences in Old Miezan that caught his attention but instead slight details of military history. An attempt from the king of the Luxor, a Baalite ally, to seize the lesser city of Antisma on the coast of Caracisson. The last name was familiar, and referral to the Miezan history of the *Bellum Stobogii* shed some light over it: Caracisson was a rich stretch of coast in the Miezan province of Stobogia Minor. Which, along with its northern sister-province of Stobogia Major, were the Miezan empire's traditional breadbasket due to their great fields and golden summers. Over the reign of Imperatrix Iusta, according to the Annales, no less than eight battles had been fought over the provinces against a variety of northern nomadic tribes and southern Baalite-backed petty kingdoms. Looking further back through previous reigns, the trend had begun at least four decades earlier.

And like that it fell into place, bitter as the epiphany was.

When Alaya arrived, she found him with a cup of wine in hand and a dark look on his face. His mood had turned sullen, now that he'd put the pieces together. Even wearing a cloak and drab vestments she was a vision, as if the lackluster clothes had been picked to make her beauty evident by contrast. There'd been a time where Amadeus had felt the first stirrings of interest in his friend, though the notion had been buried early and he missed it not. The thought that he might force a manner of affection onto Alaya that she could not reciprocate was viscerally repulsive to him, moreso for the nature of how she'd been brought to the Tower. That she'd been graceful in enduring her situation did not detract in the slightest from the atrocious nature of it. Alaya dropped onto the seat at his side without any of the put-on grace that might be expected of her higher in the Tower, wordlessly accepting the cup of wine he'd poured her and offered. She drew back her hood and Amadeus found his eyes lingering on her cheekbone. He'd learned to recognize the sight of mage-healing, and even the most exquisite of sorceries could not avoid

flesh being made tender when it was knit anew. He said nothing, for he knew pity would burn her like acid. His friend drank a sip of the cup and made a spluttering grin against the rim.

"Gods, that tastes truly awful," Alaya said. "From the Green Stretch?"

"Where else could they make such a horror?" he grinned back.

It'd been worth suffering the rest of that bottle just for the smile, he thought. She drank again, deeper this time.

"It might as well be vinegar with a handful of grapes left to stew inside," Alaya said, sounding fascinated. "This might be the single worst wine I've drunk, Maddie."

"Only the finest of the worst for you, Allie," he toasted.

She quietly laughed, the way she had back home when she was truly amused and not simply putting on merriment for the patrons at her father's inn. They both drank, and he let her take the reins of the conversation without qualms.

"Dare I ask what had you glaring balefully at parchment when I arrived?" she asked.

His jaw tightened, until he mastered himself.

"I believe," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said, "I've grasped how the Wasteland was made."

She straightened in her seat, fingers tightening against the cup.

"I expect," she said, "your answer runs deeper than Sinistra's famously ruinous attempt to steal the weather of Callow."

He dipped his head in agreement and she breathed out.

"Tell me," Alaya ordered. "All of it."

She held no office, wielded little influence and bore no Name while, Duni or not, he was still the Black Knight of Praes. Yet it did not occur to him that this could be anything but an order, or that it could be disobeyed.

"I began studying it because Sinistra's ritual was, in essence, our first great national act of lunacy," Amadeus said. "Before her, we had a hundred and twenty years of relative success: the Grey Eyries annexed, and though Summerholm did not fall its Counts were near enough to vassals of the Tower. We backed them against Alban attempts to bring them into their realm them twice, Alaya! Why would Sinistra, then, risk such a ritual? Was she simply mad, consumed by the urge to wield her sorcery?"

"Was she?" Alaya asked.

"Last year," Amadeus said, "Wekesa, Sabah and I broke into one of the lesser spell repositories of the Warlock. While Apprentice had his design on volumes writing of wards, my own interest was in a rumour: namely that old failed rituals were kept there and used as tools of teaching for the Warlock's pupils."

"And you found the ritual Sinistra tried to use there," she murmured.

"I did," he agreed. "And Wekesa believes it sound in principle, though wildly ambitious and with laughably little margin for error. If heroes had not interrupted it, the sorcery could have functioned as intended."

"She could be a talented mage and mad nonetheless," Alaya said. "We've certainly precedent enough for that."

Not, he knew, because she was arguing against him. It was the way they spoke, the two of them, presenting the opposing view so that weakness in argument and knowledge could be made evident. *Iron sharpens iron*, highborn might have said, though she was anything but a foe.

"Agreed," he said. "On the other hand, if the ritual was well-formed then it had to be tailored to the realities of where it was meant to affect. That implies..."

"There was an observable phenomenon on Creation she was reacting to," Alaya said. "Was the land souring?"

"I wondered the same," he smiled. "And early Imperial records to make increasingly frequent mentions of famines and food shortages from the moment of the Declaration onwards. Yet considering that there were little changes to agricultural practices after the end of the Miezan occupation, the source of that issue had to be older."

"Explaining why you've a pond of books in Old Miezan spread over this hall," she drily said.

His lips quirked, but the mirth left him soon enough.

"It was Rector Cornelia Orbivia who led me to the answers," Amadeus said. "The last of the Miezan rectors before trade with Callow was established. She was spectacularly corrupt, you see, yet somehow found it profitable to sail ships full of grain back Liceria."

"Meaning," Alaya said, "that even compared to the wealth of the more traditional resources offered by Praes grain still remained a worthy investment."

He felt a rush of affection, heady and sudden, for this woman to whom he'd never really had to explain his thoughts. Who he could speak a word to and have a page understood. If it was not love, then what was this to be called?

"Stobogia Minor and Major, the breadbaskets of Mieza, were under pressure from Baalite allies and displaced tribes to the north," Amadeus said. "The worth of grain would have risen accordingly."

"More than that," Alaya murmured. "It became a strategic resource. The city of Mieza was famously populous and the heart of their empire in every way. Grain could buy the love of the hungry, bind them to causes. And even for the less ambitious, it would have been prized. A ship filled with rubies and gold ingots would attract attention: an army could be raised with such a prize, or offices and officers bought. To an Emperor, it would have smacked of rebellion in the making. Grain would not attract near as much attention, if sold discretely, yet still turn great profit."

She paused, turning dark eyes to him.

"And this was when, in the Miezan span?" she asked.

"Between the First and Second Licerian War," Amadeus said.

"The practice won't have ended at all, after," Alaya said. "After the Second much of their empire fractured and governors raised their own private armies to try to claim the throne and fight the encroaching Hegemony. I expect that with the collapse of the usual grain markets, Praesi harvests kept ambitious armies fed on campaign more than once."

He'd not considered that, truth be told, for his interest had been in the consequences here and not across the Tyrian Sea. Yet every sentence she'd spoken only confirmed what he'd suspected.

"So now you understand what drove the madness," he said.

"Madness?" she asked.

He set aside his cup and leaned forward, snatching the leather-bound journal where the ink he'd put down had long gone dry. He opened it at the correct page and passed it to her.

"Grain exports from the province of Praes," she acknowledged. "I take it the sharp rise is when trade with Callow begins?"

"It is," Amadeus agreed. "No move to the fourth page of the journal."

She moved.

"Comparative yields for fields now and under the Miezans," she noted. "Higher in those days, yet the land might have been more fertile then. Less ravaged."

"Ninth page," he said.

There she would find the compared yields of eastern Callowan fields compared to those of northern Praes under the Miezans. Alaya's eyes narrowed.

"This implies," she slowly said, "that the lands now called the Wasteland were significantly more fertile than Callow's own fields as of..."

She trailed off, glancing at him.

"Seventy years ago," Amadeus said. "The most recent instance an Imperial agent had a look at the ledgers of the Count of Summerholm. The numbers to the side are for, respectively, one hundred and three years ago and two hundred and fourteen years ago."

"Largely the same," Alaya said. "Which means it is not a lone oddity. Yet it should not be possible – no, it *isn't* possible. Not naturally."

"Field rituals," Amadeus softly agreed. "They used sorcery to increase the crop yields beyond what nature allowed, year after year, because grain was more useful to them than gold and we were too far for their enemies to strike at us. And so, like a body healed again and again by sorcery without care to its natural functions..."

"The land began to rot from the inside," she completed.

"Dread Empress Sinistra might have been mad," Amadeus acknowledged, "and have significantly worsened the situation, but she was not the cause of it. Her ritual was a desperate attempt to turn back the death throes of what became the Wasteland."

Her jaw tightened.

"We still practice field rituals, Amadeus," she said.

"Trismegistan magic, not Petronian," the Black Knight replied. "And they are meant to ensure the land can be cultivated at all, not to offer unnaturally great bounty. Wekesa assures me the grounds are exhausted but not damaged by the rituals. For all his other flaws, Dread Emperor Sorcerous was a brilliant mage."

Eyes bright, almost excited though nothing had been revealed since doom and the source of it, Alaya drank of her cup again.

"So you've found answers," she said. "What do you mean to use them for?"

"To make this empire," the Black Knight said, "into more than a covenant of the hungry."

"An ambitious enterprise," Alaya commented, eyes veiled.

"It is," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said, holding her gaze. "It'd take at least two to see it through, at a guess."

Something flickered across her face, then, that he could not put a word to. It stayed there, for a time, until her chin rose and her eyes blazed with something utterly implacable.

"So it will," Alaya said, and it rang like an oath.

Seed II

"Patience is the art through which rivers shatter mountains."
– Solon of Many Decrees, founder of the Secretariat

Deep beneath the beating heart of the Wasteland, in a repository of secrets ancient and terrible, two accomplices debated the truth of empire.

Alaya of Satus had been born to the Green Stretch, but her roots were not of the mud. Soninke of no great line was she yet Soninke still, and though some of the ways she kept to had sprung from the shores of the Wasaliti her years in Ater had seen her embrace the Wasteland's rites. A caged bird in the Dread Empire's most gilded cage, she had learned the songs of power from the carrion circling the carcass of Nefarious' reign. With watchful eye and steady hand she'd taught herself to kill without ever baring a blade and to sow ruin with but whisper, the trade and tongue of those born high. Patient and smiling, she had learned the mistakes and the triumphs of those who called themselves her betters, and behind the smile taken the measure of the ailing empire falling apart around her. Like a surgeon and a sculptor, her hand had marked the cut. And so Alaya of Satus asserted this: *Praes is a game that can be won.*

Amadeus of the Green Stretch was the son of corpses now buried, born of a land tread by soldiers under different banners with every season. Duni, he was, his skin the pale shame of old defeats that Praes had deemed filth even in name, and never did he forget it. It was not the Tower's promises that whispered in his sleep but the footsteps of his youth, the wheel of unending defeats seen from the side with cold eyes. In indignation he had become squire, and so sharp a blade found it that it slew his rivals and knighted him in black. To the banner he'd raised the disgraces of the Wasteland had flocked, be they green of skin and

red of hand, Named hunted from above or every sharp mind and soul of steel that knew contempt but no captain. His was a company of the hungry and the lost, sworn to bleed for those unworthy of that blood. And so Amadeus of the Green Stretch asserted this: *Praes is a mould that must be broken.*

An emptying bottle of wine stayed on the table, and as arguing the fate of a realm was thirsty work it was not long before a second was opened – just as awful as the first, though to Amadeus the smile it brought in his friend was sweeter prize than the finest vintage would have been in its stead. Tipsy as they were, the Black Knight found that he more disposed to poetic language as he might have been otherwise though Alaya hardly seemed to mind.

“If a mill only makes poor flour,” Amadeus said, “one must first look at the wheat that is brought to it. Yet if, no matter what is fed to the millstone, the flour remains poor? Then the trouble is not with the wheat, it is with the mill.”

“You argue then, that Praesi are not of poor make,” Alaya said. “That the Empire is as a broken mill and so will only ever make broken things out of us.”

“Soninke, Taghreb, Duni,” Black replied. “Goblins and orcs and even ogres. There is no inherent blemish in any of these people, yet the Dread Empire spits out madmen and monsters with *historical* consistency. If the people are not the weakness, Alaya, it can only be the empire itself that is the flaw. And no amount of clever schemes can ever change that, because cleverness is the virtue of an individual and it is the structure itself that is faulty.”

Dark-eyed and lounging, long hair unbound, the imperial concubine – oh, how it had something at the heart if him clench in hatred every time he heard the title – sipped at the cup in her hand before raising an eyebrow.

“Yet this mill has ground out more than what you castigate, Amadeus,” Alaya pointed out. “It has whelped derelicts and disasters, true, but not only these: Maleficent first and second, Terribilis of the same. Sorcerous and Maledicta. Some of these were greater than others, but all were potent rulers.”

“Ah,” Black smiled, “but what circumstances were these? The Praes that Maleficent founded, that Maledicta and the first Terribilis ruled, is estranged from ours by more than thousand years. And the others you name all inherited debacles, an empire falling apart: Maleficent the Second came after the Secret Wars, Terribilis the Second after the Forty Years of Shame and Sorcerous’ predecessor broke three armies in three years on the walls of Summerholm.”

He shrugged.

"All three of these reigned over days where the order of things was fraying. And so I argue that our skilled rulers rose despite the lay of the Empire, not because of it," Amadeus said.

"There we disagree," Alaya frankly said. "Maleficent the Second was of middling birth and only a general in title. Sorcerous rose to prominence as the Warlock, not by ancient blood. Terribilis the Second was of a great line, true, yet never ruled as High Lord. In any other realm they would have been the shining star of a few years, then doomed to disappear when the adversity that raised them passed."

The dark-skinned beauty elegantly pointed a finger towards the ceiling, and so the Tower above it.

"The Tower and all that comes with it ensured they were able to *rule*, not merely serve," she said. "Praes does not merely follow the line of succession of an old blood, as the Callowans do, and hope greatness will come of that roll of the dice. We seek out greatness."

"And do not find it," Amadeus frankly replied. "Or at least not sufficiently often to balance the lunacy and incompetence that is much more frequently obtained. More often than not the Tower is claimed through murder, which ensures that the crowned tyrant is a skilled murderer but guarantees none of the traits desirable in a ruler. As a method of seeking greatness, it is ineffective."

Alaya's brow rose.

"And so what is to be the cure to this ailment you have pronounced?" she asked. "To shatter the Tower and to establish instead a royal line?"

"A monarchy in the western manner would not take," Amadeus said, agreeing with what she had not said. "And to collapse the Tower would be more symbolic a gesture than practical."

"And yet you sound pleased," she said.

"You have led to the exact point I wanted to make," Black said. "The reason a broken Tower or a proclaimed royal house would both be futile gestures is the same."

"The High Seats," Alaya said.

"The reason no madman or madwoman's folly has been enough to break the Dread Empire is that, functionally speaking, more power lies with the High Lords and Ladies than the Tower."

It was a bold claim to make, though he believed it the truth, so it was not without expectation of contest that he'd spoken.

"You are not the first to make that claim," Alaya said. "Always the Haunted Scholar's old work stands at the heart of it, the same three reasons given different wording: Ater, the Legions and accretion."

Ater, City of Gates, the great capital of Praes and seat of the Tower. At more than half a million souls, it was the largest city and most populous city in the Dread Empire: the queen of the Wasteland. Within its walls the greatest works of a hundred tyrants stood, among them sown secrets and wealth beyond one's wildest dreams. The Empire could not be ruled without holding Ater, for without it the bureaucracy was masterless and near every instrument of rule save for military strength mde beyond reach. It was also a city that could not feed itself, could not pay for its own upkeep and must keep its gates agape to even enemies for the Imperial Court to be worth holding. Anyone holding Ater must either rely for food on the ever-vulnerable Green Stretch, on the practice of bloody mass field rituals, or on a highborn ally who'd then gain great power and influence from that alliance – if not outright become Chancellor.

The Legions of Terror, in principle, balanced the scales of power as the largest and strongest standing army in the Empire. In practice, without the backing of the High Seats the Legions would always begin to decline. It was taxes and tributes that funded their ranks, and a tyrant attempting to assert authority over the lords and ladies of the Wasteland would see the flow of gold and steel dry up. War on the wayward nobility was one way to force the matter, and often nobles would flock to the Tower's banner in those conflicts – but with the expectation of reward, always. Besides, the gains were temporary and civil war typically opened the Empire to Callowan raiding as well as extortion over trade by Ashur and the Free Cities. Greenskins, the Clans and the Tribes, might serve as loyal and effective soldiers if trained but fear of the strength they might gain from such meant they were allowed to serve only as expendable auxiliaries. The Legions were a noose, but one not always tightened around the neck of the ruling tyrant's foes.

The last of the three, accretion, had first become known to Black as *Sanaa's Ruse*. An old Soninke story about a young girl outwitting her uncle in claiming her mother's inheritance. The eponymous Sanaa proposed that to avoid strife within kin a contest be used to choose who'd inherit, the rolling of a great stone over a set distance. The uncle was reluctant until Sanaa told him he would only have to roll the stone for a mile while hers would be for three, in deference to his age and power. And so he did not disagree, when Sanaa decreed that to ensure there was no cheating the stones could only be rolled in daylight. And only then did the uncle learn that his mile was up a steep hill's slope, while Sanaas' three were on flat grounds. And though he was a strong man one day's span was not enough to finish the

trial, and when night fell he could no longer lay hand on his stone. So it *rolled back down the slope*.

In a way it was the same with whoever claimed the Tower, for the tyrant usually became the enemy of near every High Seat simply by rising to the throne. And all those hallowed and ancient lines had at their fingertips centuries of accumulated power, influence and wealth. They ruled from cities impregnable by most means, and though no ancient bloodline was without its murderous squabbles the kinsmen banded together when the family itself was threatened. A Dread Emperor, on the other hand, rarely inherited the allies and influence of their predecessor. A decade of consolidation of authority in Ater, enforced by wars and a river's worth of gold, could evaporate into thin air the very moment the slide of a knife decided succession. A Dread Empress must undertake the great game with only what she had brought to the Tower, while the High Seats had behind them the weight of all their line. It was not that the tyrants were powerless, for they were not: Ater was the key to ruling the Wasteland, the Tower a beacon gathering Named and with the throne came the treasury as well as the Legions. It was possible for a tyrant to rule largely as they wished, and indeed this was regularly the case. But not without the support of some the High Seats, and struggle against others.

With every fresh reign the Tower's stone went back down the slope, while the great lines slowly but surely rolled their own forward.

"It is a well-written treatise," Black said.

"It is the tedious lament of disgraced second-stringer," Alaya mildly replied. "One who fundamentally misunderstands the reason the Tower stands at all."

Amadeus inclined his head to the side, inviting her to elaborate.

"No tyrant is meant to rule absolutely save if they triumph at the same games you now condemn," she said. "That is by design. From inception, the Tower has been a way to keep Praes as a single nation through what the first tyrants knew to be inevitable civil wars. It is the greater prize that prevents the Wasteland from splintering. The rise of the bureaucracy in Ater under Terribilis concentrated power there, which was dangerous to the fabric of Praes. A succession of Sahelian tyrants wielding such authority, for example, would have seen Aksum attempt secession within decades. And so resistance from the High Lords became entrenched, the difficulty in wielding greater authority increasing."

She flicked a finger at the side of her glass.

"This is not an accident or a flaw, Amadeus, it is the very *intent*," Alaya said. "No tyrant may wield absolute authority without being exceptional in a way that no contemporary High Seat can dispute. The middling and the lucky are removed when they overstep, leaving only the splendid to undertake great works."

"Your argument, then, is that the Empire's difficulty in regularly producing effective rulers is not a shortcoming because it is on purpose," the Black Knight calmly replied. "Which is absurd, Alaya, even if it is true. A government is meant to *function*, if it does not there is no compelling reason for it to keep existing."

"It does function," she said. "It does exactly what it was meant to do, which is keep the Dread Empire together and serve as means to power for the individuals of excellence who do claim the Tower."

"The for all our pretence of being an empire we are in truth a pack of tribes, requiring a charismatic warlord to move us to accomplish anything of scale or ambition," Black said. "We both describe as disastrous method of rule, Alaya. The only difference is that in your understanding the disaster is a deliberate one."

"No," she disagreed. "That reform is required I don't deny in the slightest, so do not imply otherwise. Where our opinions differ is that you ascribe the Empire's failures to institutional blindness and idiocy, where I believe them to be the consequence of an initially sound structure having survived beyond its relevance."

"Let us compromise, then," Amadeus drily said, "and say it was blindness and idiocy that kept the structure standing past its time."

That earned him the flash of a smile, seen and gone in the heartbeat's span.

"Reform is long overdue," Alaya said. "On that we agree. Yet I suspect the manner of it required will see us differ again."

"Reform is perhaps too mild a word," Amadeus conceded. "Though rebellion has an implication of haphazardness I find rather insulting."

While Black saw no particular issue with slitting the throat of unfit authority, he had no use for sloppy tools like riots and secession. Such matters were best settled with swift, steady-handed precision: the scalpel and not the torch.

"It would need to be comprehensive," he said.

"Seizing the Tower, and then?" Alaya murmured.

"Dismantling the underpinnings of the power of the High Seats," Amadeus said. "I would begin by arranging for mage academies under the Tower's direct authority and outlawing those of the nobles."

"And already we have civil war," she smiled.

He was no fool, and so had suspected that might very well be the case. Though household troops represented the foundational military strength of any Wasteland highborn, it was through mages that most lines rose or fell. A talented practitioner, helped by a cadre of skilled mages and using a potent ritual, could turn around a campaign or make all manners of obstacles disappear. All the great lines had sunk fortunes into finding, teaching and binding all those born with a strong Gift in their holdings – though some such policies were better implemented than others, with Wolof and Kahtan's traditionally the finest in Praes.

"There will be civil war regardless," Black bluntly replied. "That is inevitable. Resistance by the High Lords can then be used as a pretext to begin purges of the aristocracy."

"To weaken the lines?" she asked. "It would cow them, for a time."

"It would be convenient to pretend as much at first," Amadeus noted. "Though the intention is the extinction of every High Seat and significant landholding line in Praes."

Alaya went still, then after a moment studied him very closely.

"You do not jest," she stated.

"I am aware a significant amount of mages would be lost by doing so," the Black Knight noted. "Yet if the cities of the Empire are to be purged of demons, their wards and walls pulled down and their private armies folded into the Legions then no highborn of influence can be allowed to live. I suppose children younger than six could be spared but offering any further mercy would be guaranteeing an insurrection some years down the line. It would be best to exterminate the aristocracy entirely, to my eye, but Wekesa is certain that would represent a catastrophic drop in mage births in the following generation. Minor lines can be folded into the bureaucracy instead, with the old High Seats turned into provinces in the Miezian manner – with appointed, non-hereditary governors of limited terms."

There was a long moment of silence.

"Maddie, they would fight you to the death over this," she said.

"That is," the Black Knight smiled, thin and bladelike, "the idea."

"The civil war, assuming you can even win it and –" she raised a hand to silence his interruption, "and I know you believe you would, given time to prepare, or we wouldn't be having this conversation but Amadeus you've not even *begun* to see what they can do when feeling truly desperate – yet even assuming you do win it, it would take decades and it would ruin Praes as thoroughly as Triumphant's conquests. And we would never entirely recover from the losses, not after the purges you describe."

"Amputating a diseased limb is not weakening yourself," Amadeus calmly replied. "It is salvaging one's body whilst it can still be done. We would be lessened in some ways, perhaps. But from that position, we would then be capable of genuine growth. It is an acceptable loss."

"It is a brute force solution," Alaya retorted. "A surgeon's garb with a butcher's blade. The violence itself is not inherently unfit a means, but the impatience you would wield it with spoils the broth."

Black's brow rose, but he did not interrupt.

"Slaughtering an empire's worthy of influential, wealthy and well-armed highborn sorcerers through war is impractical," she told him. "First a more traditional reign need be established, to carefully oust them from the bureaucracy and the Legions. Then one must constrain their wealth, lead them to spend their soldiery outwards, and only then would they be ripe for the taking."

"It would still come to violence," Amadeus said. "The last step will be blade in hand."

"The last step will be unnecessary," Alaya smiled. "Irrelevance serves the essentially the same purpose as extermination, without the massive losses your method would entail. War to the knife is a messy affair, Maddie. Best the fade away instead: slowly, quietly, inexorably."

"What you describe can't be done," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said, "without first seizing the Tower."

"No," Alaya of Satus softly agreed, "it cannot."

The Black Knight sighed and reached for his cup, draining the last of the wine. Had he the choice, he'd prefer this conversation to continue for hours yet – there was still so much to say, to debate and plot. Yet what had been said here was already enough to see them both killed, if reported to the wrong ears. And if the Chancellor learned he was boon companion to a member of the Emperor's seraglio, then the very kindest outcome would be the both of them leashed through that secret being held back. No, it was time to see to the loose ends. His hand came to

rest on the pommel sword, and as librarians hid in the shadows they thought him blind to he set down the empty wine cup.

"You always end up having to get your hands bloody for the both of us, don't you?" Alaya said, watching him with hooded eyes. "I think I might grow to despise that, one day."

Black's sword cleared the scabbard, and dimly he heard a few of the more cautious librarians begin to flee. As if that'd help.

"But not today," he said.

"But not today," she softly agreed.

He went out into the dark, sword in hand, and screams followed.

Winter I

"Forty-one: should personalities among your band be clashing overmuch, consider leading the band into grave peril. Either friendship or a corpse will ensue, which remedies the issue either way."

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

Merciful Gods, it truly was a terrible job but *someone* had to do it. Today that person was Ernest, and though he'd gone as far as offering up his entire savings to anyone in his company willing to go in his place there'd been no takers. Either he'd not saved up enough to tempt someone into the risk, or they'd wisely decided that a corpse could spend no coin. Captain Noémie – her rank meant she did not have to participate in the lottery, the damned lucky witch – had ordered half a dozen of his fellows to come down to the shore with him, enough that even if the Dead struck there should be at least one runner left to bring back the news. Ernest's last attempt to sway one of them into taking his place was met with jeers and one promise to comfort his sister if he did not make it back to shore. Victor, the last one had been. He'd remember that. The rowboat was cramped and uncomfortable, though even in winter it'd been kept oiled and clean so it would remain in good shape. Ernest, by what he intended to claim was a coincidence, smacked Victor in the face with the oar when his companions pushed him out into the lake.

The waters of Lake Pavin rarely froze even at winter's peak, but they were icy cold and prone to ripping currents that could easily tip over a small boat like this one. Still that was the last of Ernest's troubles this morn, for he'd been sent out to see if any of the Dead were lurking beneath the waters. Orders had come down from Prince Gaspard himself, it was said, that all forces by the shores of Lake Pavin and the Tomb were to survey the waters every day. Rumour had it that Langueroche, further up north, had fallen after heavy fighting because the undead had

massed in great numbers under the surface of the lake before striking just before morning. The people had fled in time, but now the entire northwest was said to be buckling under the weight of the Dead's offensive. The young man glanced back to the distant shape of Sengrin, the fortress-town on the hilly slope where he'd been born, and prayed once more it was too small a town to be worth the Hidden Horror's attentions. They hardly had the men to resist an incursion if it came, for many had been called north to the capital where the Enemy had struck hardest.

Yet the siege there had been broken, Ernest reminded himself. The war was not yet lost.

A scream from the shore shook him out of his thoughts, reminding him simply rowing out would serve no purpose. Carefully, he went looking through the cloth bag hung at the front of the boat and took out a handful of small round stones. As he'd been instructed to, he leant over the side of the boat and dropped three in a line. Whatever it was the priests had done to the rocks, it worked as they'd said it would: light bloomed as they sunk deeper, casting a warm and broad glow. Now he only had to wait until it touched the bottom of the lake, repeat this twice more and he could – oh, *oh Gods no*. Standing in still and silent rows at the bottom of Lake Pavin, hundreds of figures in ancient armour spread out as far as the light was cast. Ernest desperately scrabbled for the oars again and began rowing, screaming out in alarm for his companions still on the shore, but with utter terror he saw from the corner of his eye one of the stones he'd dropped bounce off the side of a skeletal thing's bronze helmet. It looked up, an eyeless leering skull, and the young soldier nearly pissed himself.

He hardly made it another twenty feet, screaming all the while, before a spear's tip punched through the bottom of the rowboat and it began taking water. He tried to keep rowing for a few heartbeats, even as more iron spikes went through the wood, but the weight was too much and his arms too weak. There were dark shapes moving under the water's surface, but what choice did he have? Cursing, he leapt off the boat towards the shore and began to swim in the icy waters. There were things trying to grasp at his feet but he was quicker than they, even though his limbs were growing numb, and he swallowed cold and scummy water but against all odds he made it near the shore. Enough he could find his footing on the ground below the water – which was then spear took him in the back of the leg and he screamed as hooks sunk into his skin and something dragged him back into the deeper lake. Fingers closed around his throat to keep him still, and though he panicked he realized after a moment they were warm. And coming from the wrong way. A large woman in plate, with a helmet shaped like a snarling badger, grinned at him.

"Stupid brave," the stranger praised. "But this hurt."

And then he was screaming and flying through the air, blood spurting as the spear that'd been put in him accompanied him still stuck in his leg. He landed half-weeping, the pain and vicious bite of the wind on his wet body too much for him to take. The wet spear broke, though the head only dug deeper into his flesh. Someone wrapped a blanket around him and faces he could hardly make out for the tears hastily brought him up to the fire near the watchtower further up the hill.

"There's a priestess on her way," someone said. "We'll take out the spear then. You did good, Ernest. Gods, you did good."

"Who was that, near the shore?" he croaked out.

"Don't know the name, but I know what the other one told us what they go by," Victor quietly said. "The Valiant Champion. Levantine, I gather."

A Chosen, Ernest shivered. With the warmth of the fire and blanket his vision was beginning to stop swimming. He looked back to the lake and thought he must have gone mad, or been poisoned, but the others breathed in sharply and some even began to pray. All along the shore, for what must have been a mile, shapes began to emerge from the water. The dead walked, garbed in iron and bronze, flesh and bone dripping water. And further from the shore great shapes broke the surface, gargantuan snakes of bone and leather and crackling sorcery. And in front of them stood only two silhouettes, sharply glared at by the morning light. Women, both one in wet plate with a great axe resting on her shoulder and the other in a coarse green cloak-tunic that went all the way to her feet. She turned, revealing that behind the long locks framing her face she wore a mask, and flicked some droplets of blood against the rocky shore. The world *shivered* and Ernest rose to his feet.

"They'll die," he said. "There's too many, and the snakes-"

"Look," another man croaked. "Gods, *look*."

Lake Pavin screamed and tore back, the waters fleeing the shore as if terrified and snapping up most the undead with them. A few soldiers who'd already reached solid ground strode forward uncertainly as the lake continued to retreat, though any who dared to approach the pair were casually dispatched by the Valiant Champion: she smashed through them like they were glass, never needing more than a single blow and moving with blinding swiftness. The snakes – there were three, Ernest now counted – broke free of the waters pulling back and with sky-tearing screams tore forward. The Chosen in the snarling badger helm glanced at her cloaked companion, who nodded distractedly. Laughing wildly, the Valiant Champion began to run towards the gargantuan monsters.

"There's a few still loose," Ernests said, glancing to the sides.

"We can handle those, at least," Victor said, grunting.

In the distance one of the great snakes struck at the Champion, who slapped the massive maw with the flat of her axe – and after a rippling sound the snake was tossed back like a rag doll, hitting the lake and causing waves.

"That's the Witch of the Woods, it is," another soldier said, grabbing his spear. "Heard about her. Walloped the Sovereign of the Red Skies real good when they fought."

"She's not even the leader of that bunch, I hear," Victor said. "It's some Ashuran knight."

Before their eyes, the waters that'd been drawn back by the Witch began to ice. Tendrils of frost went through, like ink in water, and thickened as they went. Gods, Ernest thought, what manner of a man could command women like these?

—

Hanno caught her wrist before the blade could claim more than a scratch on the Mirror Knight's chin. He would have liked to restrain the Painted Knife entirely, for the threats she was screaming in Lunara were not mild ones, but he could not. His other hand had seized the wrist of the Mirror Knight instead, catching it before he could finish drawing his sword.

"You dare?" the Mirror Knight thundered.

Not at Hanno but at the Painted Knife, who snarled back in kind.

"Enough," the White Knight said.

"The Levantine tries to slay me in broad daylight and-"

"If you do not release your grip, I will crush your wrist," White calmly said in Chantant, then changed to Lunara. "Kallia, drop your blade."

"Did you not just hear him call the Scouring of Vaccei *necessary*?" she hissed. "Thousands of my people killed, children choking to death on ashes and-"

"I will not ask twice," Hanno calmly said.

Snarling at him once more, she did. Christophe released the grip of his own blade as soon as he no longer felt threatened, though the dark-haired hero found he had little sympathy for the man. In some ways it was a relief that Procer gave birth to so few heroes, for Hanno had known none save for the Rogue Sorcerer who'd not at one point or another stirred black rage in heroes

from another nation. The Mirror Knight was a good man, principled and well-meaning, yet his rustic attitudes and insistence that Procer's wars abroad had been for the good of Calernia were being received increasingly poorly by the heroes of the Dominion. If he stilled his tongue more often, it would be a negligible issue. Unfortunately, Christophe was both opinionated and frankly rather easy to bait. Which he inevitably was, by one of the several heroes who considered him pompous and in need of a good thrashing.

"Blood was spilled," the Mirror Knight flatly said. "There must be answer to that."

"Are you requesting," the White Knight peacefully asked, "the judgement of the Seraphim?"

The other man's face shuttered and he curtly shook his head in denial. The Painted Knife, whose Chantant had improved with the months she'd been in Cleves, understood enough to chortle at Christophe's expense. Hanno's gaze moved to her, quelling, and she stalked away like a proud cat. A spar with the Vagrant Spear would settle her, he hoped.

"You've lost less than thimble of blood, Christophe," a cultured voice drawled. "Shall you require less than a thimble's worth of justice to go along with it?"

The Repentant Magister had yet to finish the cup of wine in her hand, for she'd been more interested in spectating the aftermath of the careful barbs she'd sent the Mirror Knight's way than in finishing her drink. Lounging in her seat in heavy velour robes, the patrician beauty wore a sardonic smile that could widen or dwindle but never quite entirely left her face. Nephele might have renounced the sordid practices and sorceries of the Magisterium, but she'd yet to shed their taste for making a game of others. Even after it had nearly come to blows between two heroes she seemed entirely unrepentant – which might have amused Hanno, given her Name, were he shallower sort of man. As it was, instead he considered to be as much if not more at fault for the incident as the two who'd reached for steel.

"Nephele," he warned.

"Stygians," the Myrmidon shrugged from the side, speaking Aenian. "What else can be expected, even from one claiming *repentance*?"

Bereft of her armour for once, the slender woman was sitting on his cot and polishing the large bronze shield whose holy blessings were as a song to Hanno's Name. The Repentant Magister's smile had sharpened the moment she began speaking: neither had hidden the strong and instant dislike they took to each other the very moment they met.

"When the Exarch ran you of Penthes like a whipped dog," Nephele conversationally asked in the same obscure tongue, "is it true that you were jeered at by the mob on your way out?"

Heroes were not meant to gather in great numbers, Hanno thought, not for so long. Not without a common enemy they could all strive against – and though the Dead King was that, he was simply too distant to fill the need. He could not be found on the field, which left instead a crowd of heroes each itching to fight the war on Keter in their own way without the slightest desire to heed anyone's commands or any notion of how to remain civil with others just as stubborn. Keeping the peace between them was like trying to teach humility to a cat.

"The Magister does not speak untruth," the Mirror Knight said, having ignored the exchange he could not understand. "Can the Dominion's band of *heroic* killers now cut their allies without consequences?"

"Nephele speaks to stir up amusement," Hanno flatly said. "And you gave offence with your words that was no less than the scratch of a blade."

Christophe's face set mulishly.

"I do not deny that the sanctions visited upon Vaccei were harsh, yet they were hardly-"

"Ah, I'd forgotten," the Myrmidon mused, still in Aenian. "When Procerans have a massacre, we have to call it *sanctions* instead."

"What was that?" the Mirror Knight sharply replied, having caught the tone if not understood the words.

"Is fuck him," the Myrmidon replied, her Tolesian heavily accented.

"You," Nephele helpfully clarified. "She means fuck *you*, Christophe."

The Mirror Knight reddened. He was a young man, and proud. Too many slights had been offered to him tonight for him, he'd chew on them for weeks. It was the persistence of the Repentant Magister in stirring the pot that bothered the Ashuran, as much for the stirring itself as her persistence in doing so when she'd been confronted about it. She did not usually continue past the first verbal raking of her claws on someone's back when caught out. The White Knight's gaze moved to her hands, which he found steady, but then to the cup she was holding. Which was, as he'd noted earlier, still full. So was the open bottle at her side on the table.

"Are you drunk, Magister?" Hanno suddenly asked.

The smile vanished.

"Of course not," Nephele replied, tone serene.

A lie, Hanno thought. He glanced at the other two heroes: Christophe had followed, but as the Myrmidon spoke nothing aside from Aenian, barely passable tradertalk and a smidge of Tolesian she was utterly in the dark.

"I would ask you for use of the room, Mirror Knight," he formally asked the Proceran.

The man was still furious, but now he was also confused and aside from it all his natural manners won out – when politely asked a minor favour by someone he considered a social superior, Christophe would feel the need to grant it with aplomb. He acceded to the request. The Myrmidon would require better reason, so instead Hanno asked her to see if the Painted Knife had calmed – and if not, if she could be talked into a spar with the Vagrant Spear. The Penthesian was quite taking with the latter, if not in a romantic sense: their very public matches had become one of the favourite entertainments of the army in Cleves.

"Am I to be punished now?" the Repentant Magister smiled. "I *have* been a bad girl, and since we have the use of the room..."

"Would that help you?" Hanno frankly asked.

She blinked in surprise. He thought it a little sad, that she had grown so jaded of her own life she no longer genuinely sought companionship in others.

"If all it takes is asking, it is cruel no one has told Antigone," Nephele chuckled.

That brought out no reaction from him. Hanno understood the Witch of the Wilds perhaps better than anyone not of the Gigantes could, for the silent tongue they shared had a hundred thousand nuances but not a single *lie*. They knew where they stood, and what could and could not change from it. Insinuations thrown against that were like an egg tossed at a rampart.

"No, then," Hanno frowned. "Drink is not a remedy, Nephele."

"A remedy for what?" the Repentant Magister asked.

"Your hands shake without it, I think," the White Knight said. "How many bottles have you drunk?"

The heroine's face tightened, and so he knew he'd been correct.

"I am not *weak*," the sorceress said.

Hanno sat at her side. How many times did it make now he'd been in this position? The strain was getting to all of them, one way or another. They were far from home, drowning in death, and forced to stand shoulder to shoulder with people they might otherwise draw blades on. The exhaustion they felt was making them all quarrel more than they would have otherwise, for though their bodies were often kept rested by their Names the same could not be said of their minds.

"When you left Stygia, you renounced the sorceries you were taught," Hanno gently said.

"Not all," Nephele said. "Enchantment and clairvoyance, healing and strengthening. I am still mistress of these, for all I have cast aside."

But the curses and destructive sorceries the Magisterium was fond of unleashing on its enemies – or had been, before Hanno and the Ashen Priestess personally slew its finest sorcerers – she had renounced. The magics she used were useful, for all that some of their companions had expressed regret she was the one to come north with them instead of the Rogue Sorcerer, but in the face of relentless tides of death they would not save her life. Fear, Hanno thought, was at the heart of this. That could not easily be mended, but in sharing its hold could be lessened. So they spoke of many things, the two of them, for once pressed the heroine seemed almost eager to speak. They always were, when they searched his face and found no castigation there. Why they could expect it he did not know, for while Hanno often diverged in belief from his companions he had never once thought them his lessers. He, too, knew fear. Still remembered a corpse and a trick, words wielded like knives. *Certainty and blindness*, the monster had said. *I have ever wondered at the difference*. The sorry song of doubt, for a monster's curse in defeat might be dismissed but not so a gloat in victory.

"We must seem so petty to you, White Knight," Nephele bitterly said. "With our doubts and our failures."

"You have come a very long way to fight for the sake of people you never knew, against an enemy some claim cannot be defeated," Hanno gently said. "Even at the worst of the casual cruelty you have offered, never once did I think of you as petty."

Why do you all hold me in such esteem? He could not help but wonder, for even those among the heroes in Cleves that had never once obeyed his commands still seemed to consider him as a figure of authority – though not one to which they were beholden. It was as if they all knew something he did not, something that set him apart from the rest, and he knew not what it was. So instead he stilled his tongue and held Nephele when the bottle was empty and she wept for the home she loved as much as she hated, for the golden life she had left behind because she could not stand to

see men in chains. He held her as she broke and helped her rise when she put herself together again. She'd not needed him, not truly. The woman she'd been the moment she spurned everything she was raised to embrace was the true face of her, not the malice that came out when fear and exhaustion won. They never seemed to understand it, Hanno had learned, that every single one of them had a light in them that was not so easily put out. He put the Repentant Magister to bed, after, and took his leave. It was not yet too late to call on Prince Gaspard and Princess Rozala, to discuss where the Dead were striking.

There would be no rest for the wicked if he could have it otherwise.

Winter II

"Good for a day, a man. For a year, a priest. For a decade, a Chosen. For a lifetime, a fable."

– Alamans saying

"The western shore has held," Princess Rozala Malanza announced.

There was a round of cheers, and even some of the royals among the crowd bent their pride enough to participate. Hanno found the customs of the Principate interesting, for much of the rules that bound their behaviour to each other were unwritten. This very assembly, for example. Though the city of Cleves was ruled by Prince Gaspard, who had commanded the defence of the principality for three months before the relieving armies arrived, when assembly was had in the prince's hall the man always deferred to Rozala Malanza. The Princess of Aequitan, while leading such assemblies, in turn always offered Prince Gaspard the courtesies due to a close friend even though as far as Hanno could tell they could hardly stand each other. The grey-haired man that ruled Cleves was said to stand opposed to much the younger princess' politics, for though he was only a lukewarm supporter of the First Prince he'd been hostile to the alliance led by Prince Amadis of Iserre – of which, Hanno had been informed, Rozala Malanza was part.

The almost bewildering amount of subtleties to every interaction between the princes and princesses in Cleves was difficult to understand, though often Hanno grasped the shape of what was taking place. Though what some had called his father's unfortunate marriage meant that even within his citizenship tier he'd never been seriously considered for any of the committees, the dark-haired man himself had once been scribe to the Outer Tribunal. He'd seen the ways the higher tiers heeded conventions of their own that no mere scribe could understand, and the unseen pull those could have on the exercise of all things. Still, some aspects of this remained clear to his eye. In matters of war, Princess Rozala Malanza stood first among equals in Cleves. Even

orders from the Iron Prince, fighting fiercely to reclaim Hainaut from the dead, would only ever be taken as suggestions – though suggestions well-heeded, for no man was half so practiced at the war against the Dead King as Prince Klaus Papenheim.

The First Prince of Procer was the highest authority of all, in principle, but she had so far refrained from handing out orders through her Order of the Red Lion. She was said, though, to be moving stone and sea to ensure supplies arrived on time and aplenty on all three northern fronts while pursuing a campaign of her own against the Carrion Lord's army in the heartlands. Cordelia Hasenbach's readiness to support a political enemy – Rozala Malanza's hatred of the First Prince and her allies was an open secret – as well she could and without then meddling at every turn for the sake of the defence of Cleves had impressed the White Knight. Restraint and farsightedness were laudable traits, but especially encouraging when displayed by the ruler who was to be the backbone of the war against Keter.

"Princess Adeline's army held the beaches until the enemy retreated, and Cantal horse intercepted a flanking force that'd made shore unseen," Princess Rozala said. "Yet we would all have been days too late, if not for the intervention of the Chosen: we thank the Witch of the Woods and the Valiant Champion, who held the main force at Sengrin for three days and three nights."

Another cheer followed, even more enthusiastic than the first. The royalty and their attendants turned their gaze to the heroines of the day, which Princess Rozala had requested attend – Raphaella usually did not, and Antigone had confessed finding the proceedings enormously tedious. The Champion was grinning as she preened under their praise, though, and the Witch seeming rather taken aback. Antigone detested cities save for the towering and airy labyrinths of the Gigantes, and as a rule was less than fond of crowds. She'd been forced to suffer both for some time during the defence of Cleves, which was why she was always so eager to take the field against the dead far from the capital whenever opportunity arose. Which was why she'd no notion of how high in the esteem of the Procerans she had risen, the mystery of her mask and aversion to speaking with them only adding to her allure. Already three poems describing the heartbreaking beauty she was hiding under the clay were floating around the city, one even rumoured to have been written by the eldest son and heir of Prince Gaspard.

"It was a victory, and one worth celebrating, yet we must not lower our guard," Princess Rozala said. "The Dead still have a beachhead at Trifelin, and we've reason to believe the attacks on the western shore were meant to draw away some of our forces before an assault from the east."

The mere mention of the name of Trifelin cast a shroud over what had been a rambunctious assembly. After the siege of Cleves was first broken and the armies under Princess Rozala bolstered the defences, a general offensive had been undertaken to reclaim the shores that'd fallen to the Dead King's first wave of corpses. Along the shores of Lake Pavin, to the west, the campaign had largely been a success: Prince Alejandro of Segovia had ridden out with much of the Proceran horse and shattered the warbands that'd been ravaging the countryside. Even as a second wave of foot under the Princess of Orne had begun to march there to thoroughly sweep and then garrison the coast, near two thirds of the living armies in the principality had marched in pursuit of the retreating undead army that'd besieged Cleves. The pursuit had led to a mining village by the name of Trifelin, perhaps a day's march from the northern coast and less than a week's march from the border with Hainaut. The White Knight still remembered the battle that'd raged there, the utter brutality of it. It'd been the harshest defeat the defenders had been inflicted so far.

The Dead, they later learned, had found a shepherd's trail leading to the shore of the Tomb that'd allowed them to quietly mass numbers. It'd been an ambush, the purported retreat of the undead a trap to bait the Proceran armies away from walls and defensible grounds. The undead had poured in from the sides when the army was still stretched out in a marching column, archers firing volleys one after another and undead leaping off slopes heedlessly. Often they were simply aiming to kill a soldier with their fall so that the dead man could be raised and turned against his comrades in the heartbeat that followed. It'd been bloody fighting, and Hanno's order to send the Fortunate Fool ahead of the column had seemingly not paid the dividends he'd expected. Yet the tide had begun to turn when the Mirror Knight struck at a cliff until it collapsed atop him, allowing for a countercharge by Rozala Malanza's cavalry that swept through the undead archers on one side. It was only moment later that the White Knight was found by the Fortunate Fool, who as it turned out had fallen down a crumbling mine shaft, and only then was the full horror of the trap revealed.

Trifelin was a mining village, and even as Cleves was besieged the dead had been expanding on the tunnels. The Hidden Horror had been laying this trap for months. The Fool's warning made the difference: Hanno found Antigone and told her of what was coming. When the Dead collapse the tunnels under the outstretched army, the Witch still held the grounds aloft for half an hour through sorcery before collapsing unconscious. And so only six thousand died, at the edges of where the Witch had stood and worked her magic, instead of what could easily have been twice that – if not thrice. All those that died in the collapse rose before the dust had even settled, and though the Vagrant Spear and the Valiant Champion led a furious counter-attack against the undead that was the moment where Keter first revealed its Revenants: a dozen dead

heroes and villains had hit the lines and broken the last of the Proceran army's cohesion, routing it within moments. Hanno and Christophe found Arnaud Brogloise's still mostly untouched infantry and led it in a rearguard action until night fell, which allowed most the army to retreat, but in the dark thousands more were hunted and slain by prowling ghouls.

Casualties at Trifelin numbered over twelve thousand, at the last count, and given that those losses instantly bolstered the Keteran forces by that much there had not been a major offensive in the northeast of Cleves since. The Dead King's beachhead was being contained by a ring of fortresses, and Hanno had sent two of his own in the region to stiffen resistance, but those measures would not suffice. It was only a matter of time until the Dead resumed a general offensive, and Trifelin was likely to be where the hammer came down from.

"Prince Gaspard," Princess Rozala said, "I would now invite you to share the latest news from Hainaut."

Raphaella, disappointed to no longer be the subject of cheering, cast a curious look at him and Hanno shook his head. She was free to leave if she so wished. The Champion wasted no time disappearing into the crowd of officers, many of them clapping her back and speaking to her on her way out. The Witch followed closely behind after watching Hanno for a moment. Back leaning forward, head moving to the right. Apology for abandoning him to such an assembly, even if she felt in her right to do so. He replied straight-backed, rolling his eyes with chin raised and slightly moving to the left. Haughty amusement, without sting. She was chuckling under her mask as she left, curtly refusing to speak with the officers brave enough to address her.

"Prince Klaus caught the dead flatfooted at the Prisoner's Mercy with his heavy horse and his spears, breaking ten thousand and the latest offensive against the capital," Prince Gaspard said. "Keter has not fielded a great army since, for fear of losing it as well!"

The cheers that followed were hardy and desperate, for all knew the defence of Hainaut had been a losing battle and should Cleves' eastern neighbour fall the principality would not be far behind.

"A great victory," Prince Gaspard said when the cheering died. "Yet to achieve it much of the garrisons in the northern crags had to be stripped empty, and once ceded that ground will not easily be regained. The Iron Prince cautions us that the Dead now hold the shores of Hainaut without contest, and that they may begin marching reinforcements towards our northeast along the shoreline."

It was an unsettling thought, and one that dimmed the enthusiasm that'd begun to bloom anew.

"An attempt was also made on the life of the Iron Prince and Princess Mathilda of Neustria, by some fresh manner of ghoul," the Prince of Cleves continued, tone grim. "They speak to the monsters being more cunning than the usual breed, and possessed of the ability to squeeze through very small spaces. Princess Mathilda was attacked in a holdfast as she slept and took a wound."

Uneasy murmurs passed.

"Mathilda Greensteel informs us that they die just as easily to steel as the rest, and shriek most satisfyingly when struck with fire," Prince Gaspard drily added.

Laughter and some surprisingly fond words about Lycaonese valour chased away the uneasiness, likely as the Prince of Cleves had meant to achieve.

"I will be sending the Painted Knife to Hainaut to guard against further attempts," the White Knight spoke into the silence. "The Repentant Magister will accompany her in scholarly capacity. It has been thrice now that undead still unknown to Cleves have been revealed in Hainaut, and I want them studied for weaknesses before they are faced on our walls."

It would also prevent Christophe and Kallia from coming to blows again. The fury of their last argument had yet to leave them, and it was only a matter of time until it erupted once more. As for Nephele, a month or two proving the knowledge she had learned at the feet of the Magisterium could be used to fight the Enemy would do her a great good, and Hanno's understanding was that the situation at the capital of Hainaut was a great deal less perilous than at Cleves. At least for the moment. A rest away from the frontlines would help her find her strength again.

"Would the Forsworn Healer not suffice in such capacity?" Prince Arnaud of Cantal called out. "How many Chosen must we lend to the Iron Prince before he grows satisfied?"

Several faces darkened in irritation, others betrayed faint embarrassment: the demarcation between those who were not allies of Arnaud Brogloise and those who were. Hanno watched the man mildly. The prince was prone to bluster, and hardly a popular man even with his allies, but he tended to keep his calm when doom came to call. It was the reason he remained tolerated to such extent. That and Rozala Malanza's deft handling of him, which was why so many eyes turned to the Princess of Aquitan in the wake of her ally's comment. Still, there was something about Arnaud Brogloise that had him itching for the coin. A sense of wrongness that only the judgement of the Tribunal would truly be able to

settle in his mind. Yet that would have been... unwise. If given reason he would without hesitation, but he had not yet been given reason. In some ways it was a shame that Kallia would soon leave, for among the heroes in Cleves her skills at moving unseen were second to none.

"Surely you did not mean to imply that the Chosen are ours to command, Arnaud," Princess Rozala smilingly said.

The prince's already blotchy face reddened.

"Of course not," he said. "Only, perhaps, that in times of war royal wisdom is best heeded and-"

"Royal wisdom was heeded," Hanno evenly interrupted. "That of the First Prince of Procer, when she granted the heroes of the Tenth Crusade leave to deploy as they would in accompaniment of her armies."

"And surely one must not court even the shadow of Her Most Serene Highness' displeasure," Prince Alejandro of Segovia said, tone masterfully straddling the line between earnest and sardonic.

Prince Gaspard sneered at the handsome younger man in distaste, but all held their tongue. As Hanno understood it, hard words were still occasionally exchanged over the fact that all the reinforcing royals had voted and even agitated against the measures in the Highest Assembly that'd provided gold for the refurbishing of many of the fortress walls they now fought behind. Prince Alejandro was still on occasion heard to bitterly say that Cordelia Hasenbach's scheme to spruce up Lycaonese lands with Arlesite gold had paid rather unexpected dividends at this late hour, though only in his cups and in carefully chosen company. When the reinforcing princes had first come, for all their help they'd still been remembered by the people of Cleves as the royalty that'd nearly tossed Cleves and Hainault to the dogs so that Iserre would not suffer Praesi raids. Their reputation had starkly improved since, but their offences were not yet forgot.

"As you say," Hanno agreed. "That aside, the Silent Guardian and the Silver Huntress have now been at the fortress ring for three months. I will be recalling them for rest and recuperation. As this will coincide with rotation of troops among you as well, I would hear of the designated commanders' preferences."

He made no promise to heed them, but he would at least listen. The amused look Princess Rozala cast him made it plain she'd noticed as much though the man meant to accompany her own forces, Prince Arnaud Brogloise, seemed blind to the subtlety.

"I'll want the Witch of the Woods," the Prince of Cantal said. "And call the fool anyone who'd choose otherwise."

"As was explained at previous councils, Antigone's ability to work great magics means she is best kept in reserve so she can blunt the Enemy's offensives," the White Knight patiently replied. "As she did so recently at Sengrin."

"Offence is the very essence of war, young man," Prince Arnaud asserted. "Why, if you were under my command we'd already-"

"I thank you for your contribution," Hanno serenely replied,

His gaze moved to Princess Rozala, ignoring Prince Arnaud's spluttering.

"I don't suppose I could talk you into shaking loose the Valiant Champion?" the Princess of Aequitan smiled.

"I had meant to send the Vagrant Spear to relieve the Silver Huntress," Hanno admitted. "And the two of them..."

The dark-haired princess sharply nodded, too polite to outright grimace. It was not that Raphaella and Sidonia were at odds, much to the contrary. After some stilted awkwardness due to the significance of Raphaella's Name to Levantines, they'd become fast friends. Which, for women who were bound to the Champion's line and the Slayer's line, meant hunting very dangerous monsters together, drinking every bottle of hard liquor at hand and finding people to either brawl or sleep with. Inherently there was nothing terrible about this, but it did tend to cause some degree of damage to their surroundings. Less than ideal, on the frontlines. It also tended to cause betting pools to form, which Hanno had been told Alamans disapproved of on grounds of impiety.

"Lady Spear has a talent for striding the wilds, I'm told," Rozala said. "A good fit to relieve the Lady Huntress at Hochelin fortress, given the heights. It is Sautefort I am wary of, for they've been seeing larger numbers try their walls lately. A steady sort will be needed."

"I had been considering the Myrmidon," the White Knight said. "Yet I can see your concern. She is not the most talkative among us."

She spoke none of the Proceran tongues, but if she stayed with heroes who could understand her native Aenian she'd likely never bother to learn any of them beyond a handful of words. It would have been good for her, the steady fighting and camaraderie slowly easing her into the learning. Hanno was not, however, beyond acceding to larger concerns.

"The Mirror Knight will ride to replace the Silent Guardian, then," he said.

There was a thrum of satisfaction in the room, as there always was whenever Christophe was mentioned. Though the Procerans had been duly thankful that heroes had come to help their support against the Dead King, it'd rankled some that so many of the Named they must rely on and occasionally obey were nearly all foreigners. The Mirror Knight, very clearly Alamans and of respectable birth, had been the darling of those since they first heard of him. He remained highly popular with Procerans as a whole, helped in that by the unusual strength of his Name. His growth had not been in wild spurts, as it was for some Named, but the steady regularity of it remained troubling to Hanno. What manner of Evil was Christophe meant to fight, that he would need such strength? Something to see to after the war. There were more pressing matters. It might be needed to send someone with the Mirror Knight, Hanno decided. When exposed to long to the admiration of his people without counterpoint, Christophe tended to lapse into regrettable arrogance. A steady presence at his side reminding him that his power was meant to serve and not be gloried in could only do him some good.

"Three cheers for the Mirror Knight, then," Prince Arnaud of Cantal loudly said.

"And all our other trusted comrades among the Chosen," Princess Rozala added, a tad more diplomatically.

Wine was promptly sent for. Hanno was not all that fond of the drink, truth be told, or even drinking spirits as a whole. Yet Procerans drank wine by the barrel whenever they had an excuse, toasting even their worst enemies without batting an eye for the right vintage. Attendants returned with glasses already filled – it would be different bottles for the royals and the officers, Hanno suspected – and a shyly smiling young woman in Cleves livery offered him his glass.

"Thank you," he replied, then paused.

Like an itch on the back of his neck, a hum in his bones. The attendant paled, thinking she'd given offence. Hanno calmly set down his glass on the table to his side.

"I'd suggest taking cover," he kindly said,

In the same moment he unsheathed his sword, feeling his Name roar in his veins.

"The Enemy comes," the White Knight roared along with it.

Bells began to ring outside, and a moment later claws the size of a horse tore the ceiling open. A sky-shaking scream erupted from the fanged mouth of the gargantuan winged beast half-revealed through the tears, and even as he felt the Light well up in him

the White Knight could not resist but to feel the slightest bit thankful.

The attack, after all, had come *before* he was forced to drink the wine out of politeness.

Winter III

“Good Gods, man, you can’t simply fire arrows at them. You have to let them finish the monologue first, otherwise it’s simply unsporting.”

– Aldred Alban of Callow, the Prince Errant

The White Knight did not enjoy fighting beasts.

It was not something particular to Hanno’s Name, his study of his predecessors had made that much evident. Those of his titular forbears born to Callow, in particular, had often taken such fights as their specialty. There was sense to it, as traditionally rivalry with the Black Knights of Praes belonged to Shining Princes or Princesses. Many a flying fortress or ritually spawned monster had died to the blade of a White Knight, even as the Legions of Terror were scattered by radiant royalty. Yet west of the Whitecaps, White Knights had long been known as first and foremost killers of villains. In time of crusade they rose to higher prominence still, but that was rarer affair and in the greater scheme of things one late to the history of Calernia. Indeed, most of the White Knight memories Hanno had recalled centred around strife against agents of Below. Hanno himself considered his aspects and training to have suited him to a great variety of works, but most deeply so to fighting Named. His dislike came not from a difficulty in fight beasts, even so.

But, he reflected even as he smashed a table’s foot and let the momentum flip it up as a manner of greatshield – just in time for torrent of greasy liquid to splash against it and start eating through with noxious fumes – more that whenever he found himself doing so collateral damage became inevitable. The more removed from the plans fate had for them a hero acted, the more stiff and resisting Creation became. Hanno kicked down the warping table before it could get in his way, glancing up in time to see the Dead King’s monstrous winged vanguard further tearing through the roof. The greasy liquid it had spewed was likely poisonous as well as acidic, but that was not the most inconvenient aspect. The Dead King was fond of using such creations as transports for lesser dead, and this one was no exception: even as the greasy wetness ate at the floor, the dozen fleshy abominations that’d been vomited out with the liquid began to shape themselves into legged creatures with wet squelches. Most people would have been struck with deep fear and disgust as such a sight, but this hall was filled with veterans of the war against Keter.

They'd all seen worse, and like as not those sights still haunted dreams. So instead before five heartbeats had passed every royal in the hall had a blade in hand, Princess Rozala Malanza called out for a shield wall and the retinues formed up with finely-honed discipline. There was a reason that even in the heart of Cleves, behind tall walls and sturdy gates and thousands of guards, every single person here had worn armour. The Enemy's reach was long, clever and ever-changing. They had all been taught that lesson the hard way.

"Archers, ready a volley," Princess Rozala said, tone even.

Even before the arrows flew Hanno knew they would have little effect, the following beats proved him right. Steel pierced into the shifting flesh, but there was no blood to spill nor organs to break and so the projectiles had little practical purpose.

"Your Graces," the White Knight said, "I would invite you to withdraw to the Low Keep."

Which was close, and halfway underground. The remains of a fortress that predated Alamans presence this far north, he'd been given to understand, and one very stoutly built. The beast would not find that structure as easy to rip into. Pride and fear warred within the royalty he'd addressed, for though they liked not the notion of retreating they were not unaware that from this hall they could do nothing. With siege engines from the city, yes, and by bringing every priest in the city to bear against this great monster. But arrows shot from here would not even merit attention, and their lives were likely to be why the beast had come to this hall at all. It was the Princes of Cleves within who the war was most decisively fought, and it was pride that won.

"Lord White, we will not abandon you to face that creature alone," Prince Gaspard thundered back. "I yet rule this city and-"

With a groan the ceiling the great hall came off entirely, the roar of the beast above them all drowning out the words of the Prince of Cleves. When it passed, Hanno spoke again.

"Withdraw, Your Grace," the White Knight simply said. "And do not worry of my fighting alone."

Providence punctuated his sentence by a massive streak of lightning screaming down from cloudy skies, Antigone's working ripping straight through the back of the beast and all the way out its belly. More of the poisonous liquid spilled out, and animated corpses with it. A heartbeat later, falling from the sky in the wake of the blinding light, an armoured silhouette wielding a great trident landed on the beast's back. The Myrmidon was in good form today, Hanno noted. The White Knight took a

measured step forward, sword rising as he watched the fleshy creatures take what seemed to be their war-shape: a tall, bent humanoid silhouette with strangely gleaming claws on the 'hands' and feet. Thin, he saw, and so suspected they'd be agile as well as blindly quick. Assassins, these, not warriors. The Dead King sought fresh crowns added to his tally. The arrows earlier shot into them were on the ground, now, like they'd been spit out by the shifting bodies.

"Well?" Hanno politely asked them. "Shall we proceed?"

In ghostly silence the creatures moved, and he moved to meet them. Behind him he finally heard the Procerans withdrawing as he had requested, shield wall tightening to block the back of the hall. It would not be enough, not against ritual-made killers like this. Of the dozen foes, a mere four were heading towards him, falling forward on four legs and they ran like terrible hounds. The rest made to scatter around him, moving so swiftly they found no difficulty in treading tables and walls like they were the ground. Breathing out, the White Knight let Light flood his veins. Control, patience, and timing. This he had learned from his defeats, that with skill little was needed to accomplish much. Light glinting on the edge of his sword, Hanno took a single step forward and a sudden extension of his arm had the tip of his blade piercing the leading abomination's belly. His Name's power pulsed and then the creature was burning away like a leaf lit aflame, for the necromancy that moved it was no proof to disturbance by Light.

With a step to the side his stance shifted, and he took a second through the knee. It shed its own limb, flesh boiling as it surrendered a limb before the burn of Light could swallow it all, but the backswing carved it through the torso. Hanno smoothly finished his pivot, facing the opposite of where he'd begun, and with a step towards there thrust through the back of a third creature. He tamped down on the power he'd slid along his sword, adjusting it to what he gauged to be strictly necessary to the effect. He did not know how long this battle would last, and power wasted was power he might lack when wielding it might have saved lives. The last of the four that'd come towards him opened a mouth where there should have been a stomach and spat out a mouthful of foul black liquid at him. A flicker of Light down to his back leg, using that to push himself forward at speed – a favourite trick of the Flawless Fencer, which he has carefully learned to reproduce without drawing on her memories – the angle he craned his torso forward at carefully measured so the gob would pass over his shoulder. Hanno's blade carved right through, the Light on the edge of it making the process closer to a warm knife through butter than steel through flesh. The remaining eight had passed him, as he'd anticipated. Four on each side, all heading towards the still-open door at the back of the hall the princes and princesses had retreated through.

Numbers needed to be brought down, lest at least one succeed at squeezing through.

"Ride," the White Knight said.

He'd been refining his use of the aspect for months now, ever since the battle at the Red Flower Vales. Hanno leapt forward even as he spoke, Light roiling violently beneath him and forming into a horse already at a gallop – the trick had been learning to make it come from his legs, so that he would already be astride the horse and not need additional movement. The lance of Light formed around his free hand and in the blink of an eye he'd crossed the hall on horseback, the tip of the lance tearing through an abomination crawling up against the wall and breaking as it killed it. That part of the sequence still frustrated him, for the ephemeral had made it impossible to make the weapon more durable even if he'd since figured out how to make it other armaments than a lance. Dismissing the aspect, he did not allow it to simply disperse as he once had: the Light he claimed, for it was own, drew it back to him and then precisely released it.

Grey Pilgrims used prayers and hymns, when drawing on Shine to similar purpose, though Tariq was skilled enough to sometimes dispense with this. The Peregrine still lived however, so it had been by digging through a dozen past Pilgrim lives, three Preachers Militant of Atalante and an ancient Sage of the West that Hanno had crafted a method that was manipulation of extant Light without spoken word, though at the expense of delicate control. The broken mount of Light pulsed, once, and split into three thick javelins that flew out. They tore through tables and glasses and seats as they went, unerringly finding and tearing into the other three abominations on his side. A heartbeat later, all that remained was cinder. The last four abominations, swift-footed and still silent, reached the Proceran shield wall a heartbeat later. Bodies rising above the rim of the shields, flesh swallowing the swung swords without harm, two of the creatures leaned over the shields and quickly punctured the heads of the Proceran soldiers before them. Another simply ignored the soldiery by continuing to run against the wall as it went around them, and the last impossibly leapt above the soldiers and straight to the gates.

It flew back a moment later, missing half its body, and the Valiant Champion entered the fray.

"Gloryful day," Rafaella cheerfully bellowed. **"Axe for all!"**

The Champion would be able to prevent the last three from going any further, Hanno knew, and the greater threat here was admittedly the beast above. Yet she was not so quick she would be able to put down the last three without more soldiers from the hall dying. Leaving her to the fighting now would mean the certainty of dead soldiers for purposes uncertain, and so he

would have to trust Antigone and the Myrmidon to handle the situation a while longer.

"Take the wall-crawler," the White Knight ordered.

She did not answer, nor did she need to. They had fought at each other's side long enough that he trusted her implicit. The two who'd already kill soldiers had followed their assault by crouching down again and slithering through the now open ranks of soldiers, raking claws and spitting venom as they did. A flicker of Light down his back leg, knowledge of that trick courtesy of a woman long dead, and the White Knight was moving again. Boots whispering across the floor, he barreled through the soldiers in his way without so much a speck of the sinuous, unnatural fluidity of the foes he pursed. Better bruises than death, he believed. A flicker of movement caught his eye, the abomination closest having pressed all the way down against the ground as it tried to pass through and, striking out suddenly, he nailed it to the floor with a downward thrust. His instincts screamed and he ducked, a gleaming claw ripping through where he had been standing. Having missed its opening the creature tried to retreat, but only revealed its position in doing so.

Tossing aside the young soldier in his way like he was made of feathers, the White Knight grunted in effort as he threw himself forward. Wreathing his gauntleted hand in Light, Hanno dug into the squirming abomination's torso and let the blinding touch of the Heavens sunder the sorcery animating it. Returning to his feet a heartbeat after, he rose to learn that the Valiant Champion had meanwhile, found another weakness to these creatures: repeated partition would cause them to collapse like the touch of the Light. Hanno offered his hand to the soldier he'd tackled down, helping the young man back up, and patted his shoulder.

"Thank you, lord," the man said.

"It is everyone's war," the White Knight calmly replied. "We are in it together. Champion?"

"Is me," Rafaella volunteered.

"Best we get at that beast soon," Hanno said. "The kind of sorcery the Witch would use to destroy it would destroy large swaths of the city as well."

And though the Valiant Champion did not much concern herself with details like this, or Antigone for that matter, Hanno was well aware that the treasuries of Procer were like leaking sieves these days. The Principate was beggaring itself simply trying to keep afloat, and the foremost city-stronghold of the Cleves front being half a smoking ruin would only quicken the trouble. Not to

mention smoking ruins were hard to defend against assault, and the Dead were not yet expelled from Cleves.

"Is dragon," Rafaella firmly told him.

He flicked a long glance at the monster. It was massive and winged, this was true, and bearing great claws. Yet it did not seem capable of breathing fire, and its scales were not those of a lizard as those of dragons were. To his eye they were instead closer to the chitinous shine of an insect's carapace, and much too large to be a dragon's since every scale was no smaller than a heater shield. Likely they would be easier to break as well, though the flesh beneath could not truly be wounded like a dragon's would be. Undeath was limiting in some ways, but the Enemy was clever in employing its few advantages to great effect.

"It has some distant similarities," Hanno said.

"Is dragon," the Valiant Champion cheerfully said, "and I going to slay it."

Ah. Well, that did explain the insistence. Heroes of the Dominion had a distinct taste for the kind of deeds that'd been the staple of heroics at the peak of the Age of Wonders, he'd noticed. Such customs had poorly aged, in a Calernia where there were so few dark or savage corners left. Yet he would not argue against the truth that Rafaella had a way of eagerly brutalizing monsters that would make even other heroes hesitate. In some ways, Hanno considered the Named of the Dominion to have best taken to the war against Keter. How long that would last, however, he was uncertain. For though Levant's sons and daughters were known for their bravery, they were not known for their stomach for long, gruelling wars. The old heroics took the shape of a splash of glory and an elegant exit, while the struggle against Keter instead promised to be a brutal, protracted grind.

"We can debate that later," Hanno said. "First we need to get to-"

Through the open ceiling the beast's massive head came down, struck by an unseen force, and even as a deafening roar sounded and a gaping maw filled with great fangs opened to reveal advancing armoured undead, the White Knight reflected that on occasion providence could have a truly rotten sense of humour.

"As planned I," the Valiant Champion smugly said.

"Just as planned," he absent-mindedly corrected.

"No, you just," Rafaella patiently said. "I valiant. This not difficult, Hanno."

The White Knight opened his mouth to argue, then closed it. He'd known for some time that the Champion greatly enjoyed making sport of others, particularly those she considered friends, but to this day he was uncertain exactly how much of her attitude was a pretence. Besides, the dead were beginning to march out of the monster's gullet. Dripping in the greasy liquid that should by all rights eat right through them and their armaments, for the Dead King was nothing if not a thorough enemy. The two of them limbered wrists and shoulders as they began to advance towards the enemy.

"I have idea," the Valiant Champion said.

"You can't keep getting eaten by creatures to kill them from the inside," the White Knight sternly replied.

Hanno honestly suspected that the acid in this one's stomach was the result of Dead King's rising irritation at how successful Rafaella had found that tactic to be. Not to mention Christophe, whose unrivalled ability to take punishment had seen Antigone adopting the tactic of forcefully cramming him down such monsters several times now. The way Dominion heroes kept referring to this as 'Proceran stuffing' only added insult to injury for the Mirror Knight, though after soldiers had seen him walk out of the smoking remains of a thirty-foot tall undead ape creature without a scratch his reputation had reached new heights.

"Is from Book of All Things," the Champion assured him.

"I asked the Peregrine about these alleged differences of text in the Levant, did you know?" he casually asked.

"Oh no, enemy close," the Valiant Champion hurriedly said. "Talk later."

She hastened forward, barreling into the first group of emerging undead with her shield and greataxe raised. Though the acidic grease was eating at the edge of her axe, it hardly mattered with undead. Shattering them was often more practical an approach anyway, and the sheer weight of what the Champion wielded paired with her strength ensured any blow would at least knock the foe down. The great winged beast tried to rise again from its prone position, screaming in anger, but whatever great working Antigone had used on it was keeping it pinned to the ground. He was pleased to see she'd listened to the talks he'd made all heroes in Cleves sit down for on the subject of fighting within fortresses and cities: pinning down great monsters instead of batting them around not only limited damage, it also allowed their own side to put their own advantage to work. With every moment more priests and mages from the garrison would be gathering, more siege weapons and soldiers with oil or pitch.

Still, the Dead King had ensured that wherever this abomination landed its maw could serve as a beachhead. With Rafaella and himself facing the open maw serving as the gate, it then fell to them to hold the line while the rest of Cleves gathered the might to unmake this beast. Yet before Hanno could step forward and lend his blade to the toil of wiping out the remaining dead, an armoured shape leapt down into the group the Champion was swatting around. The Myrmidon wasted no movements in sweeping away the last few dead, her trident glinting with Light. She offered a muted salute with her weapon as he approached, quite unnecessary to the proceedings. Until the undead began to pour out in earnest, anyway. This band of a mere twenty seemed to have been a mere vanguard, by the lack of follow-up.

"Myrmidon," Hanno greeted the heroine, and she nodded back. "How fares the rest of the city?"

"This is the sole beast," she told him. "Other undead were spilled out when its belly was opened, but the Vagrant Spear and the Mirror Knight have them contained."

Only one beast? Though the White Knight suspected that creating such a construct must have been horrendously difficult and expensive, he had still expected it would be one among a flock or at least a pair. Perhaps the vanguard of a greater assault, for mighty as the creature was it was no match for the number of heroes currently in Cleves. The garrison of the city alone would have been enough to repel it, in his opinion, though significant casualties would be incurred. If this was plain to him, it ought to be the same to the Dead King. That had implications.

"This is a distraction," Hanno said. "Keter sent something after the royals while this drew our attention, as it sent ghouls after those in Hainaut."

"The Repentant Magister went to attend to them," the Myrmidon told him. "Alone."

It should be enough to slow down whatever had been sent, but he must hurry.

"Rafaella-" he began.

"- I stay on dragon," the Champion interrupted. "Go."

He nodded his thanks, extending a similar courtesy to the Myrmidon, and set out as fast as his feet could carry him.

It would end in the Low Keep, one way or another.

Winter IV

"One must admire the thriftiness of Callowan war-making, given the cost of arming bold orphans with enchanted swords compared to that of crafting undead plagues and flying fortresses. They even get to reuse the sword, most the time, if rarely the orphan."

– Dread Empress Prudence, the Frequently Vanquished

The silence was how he knew it'd all gone wrong.

Hanno of Arwad was no longer a green boy in the ways of Named, if well short of the priceless experience someone like the Saint or the Pilgrim could rightfully boast of, but he'd been allowed to learn the lessons of others. The softest touch of **Recall** saw them all drift to the surface, the parade of kindred memories. The Noble Corsair stepping onto a ship still and dead, the Shining Princess finding the great hall of Denier empty as the night sky, the Silent Slayer finding a clearing in the Brocelian without a single sound to mar its almost oppressive hush, a hundred others.

A thousand. The aspect was best used scarcely, when reaching for patterns, for it was so easy to get lost in that endless sea of memories. Easier still to realize the smallness of what Hanno truly was, but a single speck of light within a great and ancient star. Such silences were the herald of dark news, of ambush, of the Enemy having struck. No surprise marred the brow of the White Knight when he reached the narrow stone corridor that led into the Lower Keep and he found splayed before him half a dozen corpses. Cleves soldiers, the prince's own men, in good ring mail and wielding long halberds. Steady sorts, Hanno knew from having fought at their side on the walls, and skilled at war.

They'd been slaughtered like helpless children.

Some manner of long blade had slashed through the mail and broken both bone and metal with the sheer might it was being swung with. The crudeness of the wound a second glance revealed was undeniable sign this was the work of a Revenant: the blade had not been sharp enough to warrant cutting through good armour, which meant either strength beyond the reach of mortal men or some other manner of power. It was useless to attempt recalling with so little to go on, the White Knight decided, and would lose him time besides. He bowed his head to the dead as he passed, apologetic for not lingering long enough to close the eyes of the dead. Hanno would seek to keep the living alive before giving honour to the dead, though his lengthening stride as he left was poor repayment for the loyal service these men and women had kept to while they still drew breath. The Ashuran set the guilt aside for now, instead considering the wounds as he sped forward. Too lengthy and broad to be a longsword's work, closer to a broadsword or greatsword. Both were popular weapons with Proceran fantassins from the northern Alamans principalities. Those few soldiers of fortune who could afford one, anyway.

Most likely a Revenant borne of the Principate, then. Or else one so old as to make the current preferences of weaponry among Calernian peoples irrelevant. Even the former was unfortunate, given how few of those lives he'd explored in depth. Proceran heroes – and villains as well, from what he could tell – rarely left the principality they'd been born in. They tended to be called by places as much as stories, in truth. Even Christophe, perhaps the most potentially powerful Mirror Knight in the history of that Name, had been called to his fate by the need of the Elfin Dames for a defender of their sacred waters. Often heroes from the Free Cities and Callow were more useful to learn from by simple virtue of having more often fought and encountered greater breadth of opponents, and when it came to the affairs of wilderness there was simply no matching the Dominion's many heroes. Hanno had also called on the memories of the legendary founder of the Valiant Champion's bloodline to learn his delicious garlic lamb roast recipe, which admittedly some might consider an abuse of his powers. Not that any of his companions had ever complained when it was his turn to cook. Theft of recipes aside, Hanno was coming to realize that in the way he'd chosen to look through lives he'd left a gap in his understanding of Proceran ways. It would have to be remedied to, should he survive the day.

The Low Keep he was moving through was little like a castle as they were built these days, instead as much a shelter and a tomb as it was a fortress and a home. Those who had raised it, thought to be either eastern kin to the western tribes that grew to be the Lycaonese or another people entirely that'd been ended by Alamans northern expansion, had preferred digging below to raising great walls. Yet they must have been a people used to being besieged, for the Low Keep's looping corridors ended in narrow chokepoints and were curved in a way that would allow the defender to strike behind the shield of an attacker. The first of those narrowing points he encountered had seven dead soldiers, the second a full twenty scattered beyond a broken door and barricade. The third had a thick steel grid keeping corpses up against the wall, having been blown off its hinges and straight into the soldiers. A Revenant with great physical might, Hanno thought, as he'd earlier speculated. But not one with an aspect that'd allow it to cut through the likes of steel, as he'd also speculated, else that grid would be cut through instead of repeatedly hammered until it broke out of the hinges.

The White Knight was not overly familiar with the Low Keep, as he'd mostly fought in the city proper and atop the walls, but from memory he should not be far from what the servants called the Old Hall. Once the banquet hall of the rulers of ancient Cleves, nowadays it was more often used as a wine cellar for its natural coolness. The bottles and barrels had been moved early in the siege and the Old Hall instead been made into the bastard child of an armory and a war room, for though the Old Hall was

too small for a great council of royalty and Named it was fit for private talks between those who had already been given duties by the greater council. The princes and princesses who'd escaped the scuffle above should have retreated there, given that the Old Hall's ancient and crumbling wards had been entirely overhauled by Princess Rozala's mages according to the Rogue Sorcerer's design. Roland had allegedly been rather embarrassed to put these to ink, calling them a 'sloppy, faulty mimicry' of those used by the Army of Callow to protect its war camps, but even Antigone had admitted that the Praesi wards were usually half a century ahead of everyone else's. At least in lesser patterns, for she maintained that in great workings no one had yet to so much as touch the feet of the Gigantes.

Hanno has walked the airy streets of Orseis as a young man, where stone flowed like water under the guidance of songs, where great columns of moonstone decreed the very lay of winds and clouds, and so he'd not argued this. It was not without reason the Gigantes were also known as wonder-makers, even though they named themselves nothing but a pale shadow of what they had once been.

Regardless of all else, the wards on the Old Hall ought to keep the least of the dead from entering and hinder even the likes of Revenants. Given the number of soldiers that escorted Proceran royals even here in the depths of Cleves and the alleged presence of the Repentant Magister, he might not be too late in arriving. Nephele had left behind the destructive sorceries she'd learned in Stygia along with the other dark teachings of the Magisterium, but that hardly meant she was defenceless. Hanno's steps slowed as he entered a low, downwards-sloping gallery. It could be no longer than thirty feet, though the span of it had been swallowed by darkness: save for the two torches behind him and the two outside the door on the other side, there was no source of light. A few years ago, the White Knight would have let his Name augment his sight and seen through the dark without missing a beat. He'd been taught better since, by a green-eyed killer who'd delighted in brutally punishing his every bad habit. If darkness had been laid here, it was not because his opponent had expected him to be blinded by it. It was because the moment his sight adjusted a nasty surprise was to be sprung on him. From memory, the gallery was no more than six feet wide and the footing deliberately tricky so that bowmen and spearmen able to strike into the gallery through narrow slits in the side walls might find easier prey.

"Physically strong Named rarely bother with tricks," Hanno noted out loud, "save for those used to fighting creatures even stronger than them."

The White Knight timed the sequence of his movements closely, first snatching out one of the torches at his side and tossing it out into the dark before adjusting his footing: one foot

horizontal, as if prepare to thrust out with a slender blade, but instead a flicker of Light went down the back of his leg and Hanno propelled himself forward at inhuman speed. The last part of the sequence, strengthening his eyes against light, came the moment he caught a glimpse of a silhouette within the dark. A fraction of a moment later there was a loud bang and a flash of burning light – the kind that would have seared his eyes powerfully, were he adjusting them to see in the dark. Instead it merely stung and stinging he could suffer through without batting an eye. Even as the torch he'd thrown arced up, Hanno caught sight of a tall and broad man in ornate bronze armour plate. Of a helm, too, depicting some snarling creature, but before he could make out which his opponent was moving. A greatsword swung, aimed to carve through the still spinning torch, but as the initial heartbeat of the fight ended Hanno's movement trick ended with him under the very torch.

He snatched it out again, thrusting it towards the helmeted head of the Revenant, and his opponent aborted his blow before silently withdrawing into the dark. A mere moment later, there was no sign left of the undead Named at all.

"A wolf," the White Knight pensively said. "Yet in bronze, not iron or finer."

Not so with the greatsword, which was well-made steel. A more recent weapon, which was interesting. It meant the bronze armour had been kept even with steel plate likely available and that would hardly be without reason. Even more interesting was that he was being met in battle here, in what Hanno could only term an obvious trap, while the undeniably better prize would be the lives of the Proceran royalty within the Old Hall deeper in. The White Knight was being delayed, which implied another entity was already after those lives and the intelligence behind this entire affair believed that other entity capable of breaching the defence of a heroine, wards and soldiers if given long enough. Likely a second Revenant, then, though some manner of specially crafted monster was not impossible. It also meant that Hanno needed to pick up the pace.

"Your hiding trick only works when you have darkness to work with," the White Knight spoke out loud.

The dark-skinned hero genuinely believed this to be true, though that was not why he'd revealed his conclusion to his foe. It was an unusual scene he'd been presented with. The Revenant's former Name must have been geared towards physical might, for him to make use of a greatsword and so swiftly, yet he was not behaving as most Named of that bent would. Hanno was not the kind of fool to dismiss those Named inclined to the strength of bodies as duller than others, but it was true that the breed tended to be more inclined towards recklessness and swift advance than other

heroes. As they should be, given that their Names usually rewarded such audacity with luck and power. Rafaella was a good example, for though clever and apt in tactics she tended to prefer throwing herself into trouble with only limited planning. It was where and how she thrived, for that was her Role as a Champion. Yet the Revenant he now faced had preferred laying an ambush, using tricks that many heroes would outright consider beneath them and was even now lying in wait instead of seeking battle. *Used to fighting stronger creatures*, Hanno considered, though it did not feel like a full explanation. Unfortunately, given that the Dead King's grasp reached across several centuries and lands now considered quite tames had at times been considered more dangerous than the Brocelian, this did little to narrow the scope of possible identities. Torch still in hand, the White Knight began to stride towards the other end of the gallery.

Bronze armour, and a helmet like a snarling wolf. The Lycaonese were the ancient enemies of Keter and they did have a strong cultural association with the beasts, Hanno thought, but they were hardly the only ones. And they'd been one of the first human ethnicities in the west to begin using iron, too, which would make the bronze armour odd. Or would it? Iron hindered many lesser sorceries, he remembered. The darkness trick, and perhaps even the light that had blinded him, might not be faded aspects but instead enchantments woven into an armour. One made in bronze, a metal that the ancient peoples of Calernia had favoured above all others when it came to laying enchantments. Nine steps, before Hanno reached the end of the gallery and the second part of the ambush was sprung on him. It was the light trick that'd given it away, and it was the same reason the White Knight had been unsatisfied with his guess of the Revenant's former purpose. The trick had been woven to specifically hurt a Named fortifying their eyes, which meant his opponent was used to fighting other Named. And that meant the light at the end of the gallery, the other two torches, was a second part to the trap.

Why even leave them, if the Revenant had advantages from the dark? The coming ambush had been obvious enough even with only part of the gallery shrouded in darkness. The Revenant had left a sanctuary at the end of the obvious danger because it allowed him to dictate where Hanno would be moving without lifting a finger. It was, the White Knight decided, a cunning killer he was facing. One whose life might be worth learning from, should he learn enough to tell it apart from the rest of the sea. Three steps now, and timing would be everything. On the first step, the White Knight breathed in. Light, never far from his grasped, stormed through his veins. On the second step, the White Knight breathed out. He grasped the Light by the reins, shaped it and directed it. On the third step, the White Knight acted. He tossed the torch forward again, even as from a dead angle's shadow the Revenant emerged and snuffed out the two torches flanking the gallery's gate simply by clenching his armoured fingers into a

fist. The stretch if corridor ahead went dark, for all the other torches were too far to cast light.

All that was left was the flickering flame of the torch he'd thrown, arcing up and forward, and even as the Revenant faded into the darkness the White Knight smiled. And stomped his armoured boot onto the ground, releasing Light in a wave. The Revenant's looming silhouette reappeared, seemingly startled, and Hanno idly confirmed that his guess had been correct. It was the armour that allowed him to disappear, that same armour touching the stone floor he'd just shot Light across. Modern sorceries might not be so easily disrupted, but this was ancient magic: it shattered at the slightest touch of Light. Without pausing, as the reflected light of the arcing torch flickered across polished bronze, Hanno called on his aspect without so much as a whisper. **Ride**, he thought, and Creation echoed of it. And now the White Knight used a second refinement on the aspect he'd devised since the Red Flower Vales. Namely, that while the aspect usually helped him form Light to use this was not, strictly speaking, necessary: he could use Light already at hand. Such as the one he'd just released across the floor, snatching it up before it could fade and shaping it for swiftness. His arm extended, he rammed the forming lance of light through the weakness in the Revenant's armour, the slight space between helmet and cuirass, and felt the Light searing its way through like a hot knife through butter.

Amaranta Viegles, long ago the Sage of the West, had spent a lifetime studying the Light. She'd been a major influence in the shape the Lanterns took in the centuries after and died at the age of ninety-three, fighting a dragon with her bare fists. That last brawl had made it into Levantine legend, but it had been not the many duels of her early and late life that Hanno had found most useful but instead the stretch from her fifties to seventies. During those decades she'd experimented with applications of the Light, and though most of what she'd set down of those studies had been lost to flame during the Scouring of Vaccei the White Knight had sat through the revelations of those years with her over long hours of mediation within his aspect. Like, for example, the evening where she had grasped that with enough concentration the initial movement ascribed to Light could still be changed when it had been set in motion. All it required was the addition of fresh Light, as for some reason beyond the comprehension of mortals even a speck added to the initial Light would be enough to turn even a pre-existing sea of the power into a completely different working by the Light's own laws.

And so, even as the White Knight's aspect saw Light emerging from his legs to form into a mount, he added a speck more. In the fraction of a moment that followed he seized all the Light that'd been made, and without missing a beat slammed the lot of it into the lance already in the Revenant. The upper half of the dead

Named vaporized, and he formed a bladed edge along the lance's length so he could slice through the lower half outright. He'd had only a single opening, but these days that tended to be all that Hanno needed. Ahead of him the torch he'd thrown clattered against the stone, and without a word the White Knight resume his advance towards the Old Hall. The Repentant Magister ought to have lasted this long, he thought even as he quickened his steps, and with a turn under flickering torchlight found himself stepping into the narrow hallway where the Old Hall's gate awaited. Corpses were strewn over the length of it, savaged enough it was hard to tell how many bodies there truly were. The grisly scene reeked of blood and excrement, and the White Knight pushed down a grimace when he saw the heavy oaken doors that should have protected the Old Hall's entrance had been ripped open.

He could not tell the state of the wards, but that boded ill. As did the silence that was all he could hear coming from what should be a hall crowded with soldiers. Sword in hand, he prepared to – the sound that interrupted him was deafening, like someone had balled up together a hundred screams, distilled them and unleashed them all at once. A thin silhouette was blown out of the Old Hall and smacked against the wall opposite its gate before nimbly rising to its feet. Long claws of steel had been affixed to the Revenant's hands, and it bore a now half-shattered mask of clay painted in shades of grey and green. Sound resumed from within the hall, most of it cheers. Before the Revenant could even decide whether to flee or attack again a small painted clay tile, no larger than a pair of fingers, was tossed onto the ground in front of it. The Revenant hissed in anger and tried to back away the opposite way from the White Knight – who noted with amusement he had yet to be noticed – but the moment it took a step an intricate rope formed of what appeared to be small interlinked shield panels emerged from the tile and snatched its foot, dragging it back.

Even as it tried to kick away the tile the sound from the hall cut out again, as if swallowed whole, and the Repentant Magister emerged from the Old Hall. Loose robes trailing behind her as she advanced in silken slippers, Nephele was holding up a hand and within it was a golden device spinning so swiftly on itself it seemed almost a sphere. It was sucking up noise and sorcery like a hungry whirlpool.

"I did not need them to learn right from wrong," the Repentant Magister said, tone hard but somehow awed – as if even in the depths of her wrath she could not quite believe what she was doing. "And I will not return to their old lessons now like some cowering child."

The Revenant smashed the tile and the rope vanished. Hanno did not move an inch. The Repentant Magister, with a snarl, clenched

her hand around the golden device and the deafening blast from before sounded again, smashing the Revenant into the ancient stone and grinding it like some monstrous millstone of noise and sorcery. A ragged remnant of the undead Named fell to the ground, when the working ended. Nephele slowly stepped forward even as her palm opened and the device began spinning again.

"I am not defenceless," the Repentant Magister said, glaring down at the Revenant. "I am not *lessened* by looking in the eye the evil I was once part of and choosing to cast it aside. And Gods take my tongue if I lie, but when this war ends I shall not be ashamed of how I fought it."

Fingers clenched, sound and sorcery roiled, and the last remnants of the Revenant were ground to dust. Hanno thought of how Nephele had looked that night, weeping and afraid, and felt his heart clench with pride. *You are your worst day*, the White Knight thought, looking at the straight-backed and clear-eyed sorceress standing before him. *But you are your finest day as well, and every single other one. Even those yet to come.* It had been a dark day, this one, Hanno of Arwad thought. And yet it'd become a little brighter for the light just brought into it. *This is how victory comes*, the White Knight softly smiled. *One candle lit after another, until we have chased away the night.* Hanno sheathed his sword and stepped into the light, for the Enemy was still afoot in the city and there was work to be done.

If his steps were just a little lighter, well, who could tell the difference?

Kingfisher I

"Regrets will find you on their own, but redemption must be sought."

– Hektor the Ecclesiast, Atalante preacher

In Brus there was a story every child knew, about the birth of kingfishers.

Some said it had been the House of Goethal that first spread it, for the kingfisher was their emblem, yet shrewder souls instead mused that it had long been a popular legend among the Bruseni and that a young royal line would be wise to tie itself to such roots. The House of Barthen was long gone, the last of its line married into the Goethals, but some yet remembered that Florianne Goethal had first seized the crown from a boy of three after the entire adult line of the Barthen had perished on the killing fields of the Sixth Crusade. Yet the story was told to children, and as is ever the way with stories it grew and changed with the span of the years.

Brus, the story went, was once a green and fertile land. Blessed by the Gods Above with ever-bountiful crops, its weather was fairer than even that of the southlands and none knew hunger within its bounds. It was a kingdom of peace and plenty where swords and disease were banished, for in those days the Halcyon kings and queens ruled and they had been hallowed above all others. Every year the king and queen journeyed west to the Skyron Ocean, where they humbly gave themselves to the waves and asked for the blessings of Above. And so, pleased with their obeisance and humility, Above returned them to the shore along with the favour of the Heavens for the coming year.

So it was, until Queen Alisanne and King Cenrich ruled, for the two were fair to behold and clever of mind. Their three sons were worthy princes too, and Halcyon was set to thrive for my years to come. Yet the king and queen of their virtues they grew too proud, telling men that they ruled a great realm of their own making and that its greatness owed nothing to the Heavens. When the days grew short and the nights long, they did not journey west to the sea and instead threw a great banquet where all were invited. For this impiety, the Gods Above punished them, turning their three sons into beasts: the eldest into a wolf, the second into a snake and the youngest into a bird.

Angry at the punishment, the king and queen renounced the Heavens and incited the people of Halcyon to anger. When statues of the Gods were broken and temples burned, Above sent a great wave from the sea that turned a third of the kingdom to rotting swamplands. There the people starved, until the youngest son taught them to fish and partake of the flesh. In doing so the bird-prince stained his throat red and belly with the guts of the catches, the feathers forever grown red. There the people renounced the king and queen and returned to the embrace of Above, sowing great fury in the heart of prideful rulers.

They set a crown on the brow of their eldest son, the wolf, and sent him to cause death and dismay among the people who had renounced them. For this heinous act the Gods Above made barren a third another third of the kingdom, making hills of stone where there had once been golden fields. The bird-prince, seeing the plight of his people, struck at his brother with sharp talons and sent him fleeing north, where he would breed with wolves and rule them, ever scheming vengeance. The lost people of the hills he led to a river whose waters had turned blue and bathed in it, teaching them the secrets of the hills: within the barren stone lay cobalt and copper, which could be dug out and traded for food. His feathers, doused in the waters, turned blue save for those which were already red. And so the people of the hills renounced the king and queen as well, singing praise to the Heavens.

Queen Alisanne and King Cenrich grew fearful, then, of what they had wrought through their arrogance. They sought to make amends and sent for the youngest son the bird-prince, but they had closed their eyes to evil. Their second son, the snake, had sworn his soul to Below for the throne and sunk his fangs deep into their hearts as they slept. He claimed the crown, coiling around the realm, and the people acclaimed him. For this obscene act the last third of the kingdom was cursed with strife, death repaid in death as all the kingdoms of the world struck the realm to take its bounties. It was to a land of swords and fear that the bird-prince returned, and at this he grew wroth.

The youngest son sought the people of the swamps and the hills, telling them of his brother's foul deed, and asked for their aid. The people of the swamps, fishermen with spears of bone, answered the call but those of the hills were fearful of death. They made swords of copper, to arm the fishers, but did not heed their prince and for this were made lesser: the metals they dug out from the earth began to seed sickness in them, a weakness of the body to match the weakness of their souls. Yet with the fishermen alone the bird-prince went to war, and with the blessing of the Heavens cast down his treacherous brother before making peace with the kingdoms of the world.

There were those who would have proclaimed him king, then, yet instead he flew west and humbly gave himself to the sea. The Gods Above returned him to the shore, once more a man, and with their blessing he returned to be crowned. Never again would the golden days of Halcyon come, but King of Fishers had through the curse been taught how his people should be made to thrive and heeded the lessons of the Gods Above until old age took him. At the moment of his death it is said that his last breath left him in the shape of a bird in feathers of red and blue, which men now know as the kingfisher: the soul of the King of Fishers, hateful of wolf and snake until the Last Dusk, eternal guardian of the Bruseni.

On the day Florianne Goethal became Princess of Brus, it is said that hundreds of kingfishers were seen flocking to the capital. Struck by the sign from Above she chose the bird as her sigil, and ever since the House of Goethal had ruled ably and justly.

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Frederic Goethal was five years old when his mother told him the story, and he only half-listened. It had been a long tale and he'd been tired out from his lessons of the day, then lulled into half-sleep by her tender hand against his brow. He could not remember falling into slumber, only waking up late the following morning with the unearthly slight of a kingfisher perched on his windowsill. The brazen plumage and long beak had him string in awe as the bird cast him a long glance before flying away.

Somehow, even at five, he'd felt like he'd just failed at something. When the servants came and clothed him, later, they brought him into his father's parlour and Robert Goethal glared down at his son through a thick frown to inform him that his mother had been sent away for being an embarrassment to the family.

Frederic asked what that meant and was slapped across the face. Tears stung his eyes, but he asked if he would ever see Mother again. He was slapped across the face, harder this time. He began weeping, five and in pain and confused. Father furiously bellowed for the servants to come and take him away.

As he grew older Frederic learned what *an embarrassment to the family* had truly meant, listening to the gossip of servants and household guards. Mother had taken a lover from the city's House of Light, a sister good standing and high birth. That meant that when Mother refused to end the affair when confronted, Robert Goethal had not been able to simply order the priestess killed. Instead he'd had to ask a favour of his brother, the Prince of Brus, and use his influence to have the other woman sent to a temple in the far south. His wayward wife he'd had sent away to a summer house on the shores of Lake Pavins, where she would be kept luxuriously enough her kin in Lyonis could not complain but kept in utter isolation from the rest of the world.

At the age of seven, Frederic bribed a passing *fantassin* with nine stolen silver butter knives to bring a letter to Mother. Before the day's end Father slapped him across the face and sent him in the courtyard to be switched by a servant. The mercenary had turned him in, of course she had. Why travel all the way lakeside when she could earn an even greater reward by betraying him? Twice more he attempted, once with a brother from the House – who left the mansion before day's end with fresh Goethal silver for his temple wile Frederic got switched – and the other with a grizzled old Lycaonese soldier, who simply took the reward and left. The last stung most of all, in a way, for he'd been told that the northerners were savages but an honourable breed in their own way. Evidently not.

At the age of ten years old, Frederic Goethal set down his training sword after a afternoon's work with his swordsmanship tutor and reached for a cool wet cloth only to find a kingfisher perched on the edge of the basin, long thin beak drinking from the water.

"If I am to lose the other," Frederic told the bird, "you'll get no grief from me."

The bird flew away at the noise, spooked. It was just a bird, of course, and he'd been silly to believe otherwise. So he kept believing, until he was called to his father's parlour that night.

"You will be leaving this house tomorrow," Robert Goethal told him, deeply delighted.

He did not ask if he was to be sent to Mother's side. Frederic had not taken long to learn that the slightest mention of her would have his cheek stinging.

"Am I to understand I have displeased you?" he asked instead.

"No, Frederic, you have done well," his father said. "You have lived up to my blood. Tomorrow morning you will begin fostering with your uncle, at the palace."

"With Prince Amaury?" Frederic exclaimed, genuinely surprised.

Though his father had another sibling, a younger brother, he hardly ever spoke of him.

"Indeed," Robert Goethal triumphantly smiled. "His own sons have proved to be weak seeds. Bide your time, Frederic, and we might just get the last laugh."

Frederic Goethal thought of the kingfisher, then, of the swift beat of wings and the ripples they'd caused across the water. A warning, a promise, or simply a herald of change? Perhaps the choice was his to make.

"Of course, Father," Frederic smiled back.

There was no we to be had, here, and never would be. If there was a choice to be made on this night, let that be it.

—

He never called the man Uncle Amaury, not even once.

Prince Amaury Goethal of Brus was not a man who invited informality, not from his closest kin or even his wife. Being fostered in the palace was a bewildering experience for the first year largely because Frederic had no real notion of why he was even there. Prince Amaury had two sons, the first of his cousins the young boy had met, and it was the poisonous hatred the eldest of the two showed him at every opportunity that eventually allowed Frederic to put the pieces together. Nathanael was a womanizing drunk with persisting gambling debts, though his royal father had only washed his hands of him entirely after an incident where he killed the son of good family over allegedly cheating at cards. Frederic refrained from asking how many sons from families not quite as good had died and gone unlamented before the line was judged to be crossed.

His other cousin, Auguste, was on some days a perfectly fine and amiable fellow. Yet not even the finest efforts of the House of Light had not managed to end his unfortunate tendencies to fall

into black rages and address thin air. A wizard had been brought in and fed him some tonics before babbling a few incantations, which only succeeded at making Auguste blind in one eye when the rages struck. The wizard was hanged as a charlatan, but there was no denying that Prince Amaury's youngest son was no more suitable to rule than his eldest. And so Frederic Goethal, sole child of Prince Amaury's oldest brother, had been brought to foster at the palace. No formal announcement was made, at first. Stringent lessons by an ever-shifting roster of tutors filled his days.

Languages with Monsieur Lucien, until his Tolesian and his Reitz were as fine as his Chantant, riding lessons with Captain Ghyslaine of the *Lances Farfelues*, the noble sword with an Arlesite nine-sun duellist and the soldier's sword with a retired Hannover instructor. History and poetry, the lute and the seventeen formal dances of Alamans courts, arithmetic and heraldry. His head was filled to burst and sometimes it felt like half of what was poured into him spilled out, but Prince Amaury did not send him away. Cousin Nathanel's cruelties became more frequent as his stay lengthened. The older boy – who should have been a man, by that age, but Prince Amaury had ever only called his eldest son *boy* where Frederic could hear – was a petty tyrant, helped in arranging insults and torments by his feckless friends and favourite servants.

His uncle treated Frederic in a way the boy found hard to place at first, until one morning he went to the stables and realized he was being treated the same as stallion being trained to race. Watched closely, worked to exhaustion and scrutinized for every imperfection. Whatever kindness was doled out was distant and measured, but neither was he offered cruelty or mistreatment. Frederic Goethal was being assessed for his suitability to inherit Brus, and should he be found lacking one of his cousins from the third branch of the House of Goethal would be sent for as he returned to the house in the city, to live with Father. That, more than anything else, drove Frederic to excellence. He would not return there, he would not. He would distinguish himself, and one day he would be important enough that when he went to see Mother no one would be able to stop him. The fire lit in him was enough, in the end, to attract Prince Amaury's approval.

His uncle found him, one afternoon, looking at one of the tapestries in the ivory wing of the palace. It was a beautiful piece, lightly woven with *fil d'or* and the finest Lange linen. It depicted Florianne Goethal's victory over the grasping traitors who'd tried to sell Brus to foreign crowns after the House of Barthen was decimated in the Sixth Crusade. A flock of kingfishers flying above the triumphant warrior-princess as she led noble riders in trampling an assembly of distinctly snake-like traitors.

"My prince," Frederic knelt, when he saw his uncle.

"Rise," Prince Amaury replied, flicking a dismissive hand and turning his gaze to the tapestry. "A pretty thing, isn't it?"

"Glorious, even," Frederic replied. "It is the true birth of our house, my prince."

"True? Truth has naught to do with it. Learn this well, nephew: all pretty things are lies," his uncle conversationally said.

Frederic was rather aghast, though he kept this away from his face.

"Did you ever hear the story of the kingfisher's birth, Frederic?" Prince Amaury asked.

"I have, my prince," he replied.

"Stories are the dregs that gather in the grooves left by truth," the ruler of Brus said. "The Bruseni, long ago, ruled a great kingdom in the north of what became Procer. That kingdom broke, and the kingfisher's story tells us of reasons why – the sea's encroachment, land turning barren, civil wars. Lycaonese raids. The rest is what men believe ought to be there, or were told was by their fathers."

"Is there not truth in the story as well, then?" Frederic asked.

"Not in the manner you mean, nephew," the prince thinly smiled. "Florianne Goethal had a wicked sense of humour, you see. Or so the story goes, among our kin. She chose the kingfisher as her royal sigil for the lesson she'd discerned in the story."

"And what lessons were these?" the boy softly asked.

"Opportunity, Frederic," Prince Amaury smiled. "Opportunity must always be seized, that is the lesson of our blood. The kingfisher-prince found fish in the swamps, found wealth within barren hills, found a throne amidst wars. Always where lesser souls faltered he sought opportunity and *rose*."

"Is the lesson not one of humility, my prince?" Frederic asked. "For all his exploits he remained but a bird, until the Heavens deemed it otherwise."

"The Heavens are another story we tell ourselves," Prince Amaury said. "There is a groove of truth beneath it, never doubt that. But we have filled the silence with a madness of words. We must always fill the silence, nephew, as Florianne herself once did."

The older man, handsome and regal even in his growing age, ran an almost tender hand down the tapestry.

"There were families that were closer kin to the Barthen," the Prince of Brus told his nephew. "The Fenvain were so deeply married into the line they were considered a cadet branch. There were more powerful families, as well: the Manvers were seneschals of the city, the Loncoeur had ties to Lyonis and the greatest standing army in Brus. And yet it was Florianne Goethal, her line noble for only three generations and of soldier's stock at the root, who became Princess of Brus."

Prince Amaury stared at the depiction of their common forbear, her splendid golden locks a crown before she'd ever worn one.

"While they all quibbled at the capital, fighting over who would be regent and who would get the last Barthen as a son-in-law, she went to the country instead," the fair-haired prince smiled. "She gathered every soldier she could call on, she sunk her fortune into buying every fantassin company in Brus."

A pause, an admiring sigh.

"She took the city and she hung them all," Prince Amaury said. "Every single last one of them. Because she had seen the opportunity and they had not. Oh, we wove stories afterwards. That the Loncouer were trying to sell the crown to Lyonis, that Fenvain and the Manvers had sworn oaths to part Brus in two so both could rule, and perhaps there is even a grain of truth to them. But we shall never know, because Florianne hanged everybody who might speak to that."

"That is savagery," Frederic said.

"That is ruling," the Prince of Brus replied. "That is the truth of the House of Goethal, nephew: we are, in the end, the kingfishers. The children of opportunity. And that is why where other houses boast of honour and faith and prowess, ours are simpler. What are they, Frederic? Our words."

"J'ose," the boy replied.

I dare, it meant. And Frederic now heard words at the end of them he had never imagined before: *I dare to murder, to betray, to usurp. I dare to rule*. All the pretty things he'd believed in now tasted like lies.

"It was my mother, who first told me this story," Frederic said.

The fair-haired prince did not reply. Would not, the boy grasped, until he dared to ask.

"Is she still in the house by the lake?" he asked.

His cheek did not sting, though what followed made him wish it did.

"She is dead, Frederic," Prince Amaury replied. "She was dead before you began your fostering. She went for a swim the first spring after her consignment and drowned."

The sting of a hand would have passed. This, Frederic knew, this would not. This would stay.

"Are you going to defend him?" the boy asked, dimly curious.

"Your father is my brother, and there can be no closer tie than blood," the fair-haired man said.

"That is not a defence," Frederic said.

"He is my brother," Prince Amaury acknowledged. "Yet I will not have my successor unduly influenced by even my kin."

Past the tapestry, through the long sunny corridor of windowpanes filled by light and warmth, Frederic Goethal glimpsed a bird of red and blue.

He too, the boy decided, was a child of opportunity.

Kingfisher II

"A wise man fears heroes not for their nature but for what they were made to fight."

– King Edward III of Callow, the Fratricide

Learn this well, nephew, the Prince of Brus had told Frederic. *All pretty things are lies.*

Was this to be the bitter truth of the world, then? That men and women gilded the ugliness of their works and smiled at each other, in tacit accord never to pick at the paint? It was a foul thought but those words, among others, echoed still in the boy's ears even as he was formally proclaimed the heir to the Principality of Brus. The Florian Basilica was an exquisite piece of work, at the heart of it a great circle of stained glass windows tall as two men each and enchanted to change colours with the seasons, yet the pews that could have seated five hundred bore less than a fifth of this. Frederic's prince uncle had arranged for a brisk ceremony without frills, so that the unfitness to rule of his two sons would not be lingered on even as they were formally stripped of their right of inheritance. One of the Holies had deigned to attend in person and even signed the act of disinheritance instead of Brother Antoine, the appointed shepherd of the basilica.

Frederic was rather thankful for the attendance of the Holy, as otherwise Cousin Nathanael might well have thrown a fit: even now he was not bothering to hide his fury, though it was kept

mastered. Even Nathanael was not fool enough to indulge in a tantrum before such an influential priestess as the one who had come, for the House's disapproval was a weighty thing to even one of royal blood. The Holy One personally saw to the appointment of Prince Amaury's new successor, a gesture of great respect that Frederic could not help but see as two great beasts scratching each other's back. His uncle borrowed the authority of the Gods to see his own carried out, while the Holies were recognized as having the right to grant that authority to begin with. All benefited, the fair-haired boy whimsically thought, save perhaps the Gods Above themselves. *But when faced with silence, what can men do save fill it?*

Frederic Goethal was anointed with blood and water, then draped in a fine cloak bearing the colours of his house. The priestess led him in swearing the ancient oaths – *he was to be true, to be brave, to pursue the grace of the Heavens in all things* – and afterwards he rose to his feet the heir to the Principality of Brus in the eyes of Gods and men. How strange, that he felt no different before and after. Almost as if a crown was only ever a crown when seen in the eyes of others.

If Frederic caught sight of wings in red and blue high above in the rafters, he kept it to himself.

—

The years passed and the Principate of Procer continued to eat itself alive.

He'd been too young to understand it, but he was fourteen now and there was more to his world than the walls of the palace and the few lessons that took him beyond them. *Princess said she had a right*, the people sang in the streets, growing quiet when riders passed by them. *Princess said it'd be a fight*, the words picked up when the sound of hooves passed. *Now princesses are all aflight, and the pot it is boiling*. The irony of it, Frederic had come to decide, was that this war had already been won half a dozen times. It'd been won at the Battle of the Swallows near the border of Orne, again at the Sack of Lullefeuille in Creusens, at the Waltz of Fools in Brabant and even the Treachery of One Mile just outside the Salian border. All victories that should have broken the spine of causes, yet though the faces and the friends changed the war kept marching on unabated. When even victory was not enough to win a war, Frederic sometimes wondered, what was left to it but *losing*? Yet his unease did not matter, for the House of Goethal had already picked its man for the throne, Prince Dagobert of Lange. The cause seemed promising, it had to be said, as the Prince of Lange had lately become the preeminent crown of the northwest and perhaps even beyond.

The year before Frederic was first brought to the palace had seen the final death of the other great alliance in the north, the

coalition with Cleves and Hainaut that had formed around Prince Fabien of Lyonis. A victorious pitched battle near the capital of Lyonis had forced Prince Fabien into the fold under Prince Dagobert as well as inflicted grievous enough casualties that – at least for now – the principalities of Hainaut and Cleves had withdrawn from the Ebb and the Flow. Peace had not followed, naturally, for victory ever brought danger with it. Now it was the Malanzas of Aequitan that were turning their gaze north, eyeing the southernmost ally of the coalition: Segovia. Though Princess Aenor of Aequitan was no great general, she'd brought great numbers to her side through skillful diplomacy. So far caution had kept her coalition's attention on the eastern alliance under Princess Constance of Aisne, but now Princess Aenor was wary of allowing Prince Dagobert to consolidate his position in the northwest without Lyonis and its allies acting as a check on his expansion.

Frederic learned all of this from his uncle, whose steady hand at the keel had kept Brus out of the worst of the wars while reaping great benefits. He could admire the man, even if he would never love him.

"An offer has been made for your hand by the Malanzas," Prince Amaury told him one evening.

After turning thirteen, it had become custom for Frederic to spend one evening every week in the Prince of Brus' solar to discuss lessons and politics. Sometimes these discussions were only between the two of them, but other evenings saw his uncles' favourite advisors and the powerful men and women of Brus invited to share brandy and talks. Frederic had grasped, without needing to be told, that he was being introduced to the same faces he would need to use and be wary of when he came to rule. Cousin Nathanael had savaged a salon with a knife in a fit of rage when he'd heard of the invitations become regular. Frederic now had a taster for his food and drink.

"Princess Aenor of Aequitan has daughter and a son," the fair-haired boy recited by rote. "Rozala and Hernan, with Rozala the eldest of the two."

"It is her hand that was offered," Prince Amaury told him, sounding amused. "She has a few years on you, though I am told she is a handsome girl."

Which added value to the match, though not as much as the fact that Rozala was the heiress to Aequitan. Though it was true and Brus and the other principality were far apart and that marriage alliances between ruling royals always complicated matters of succession, the offer was an attractive one. Most likely Rozala would follow her mother to Salia, being groomed for a Malanza dynasty on the high throne, while her younger brother served as Prince of Aequitan in all but name. Frederic himself would be

expected to come to Salia as Rozala's husband and his uncle's man in the Highest Assembly, the two of them arranging matters of succession so that the House of Goethal would be stable at home while keeping a foot on the high throne. It was a tempting offer, befitting of a woman of Aenor Malanza's reputation.

"If we turned on Prince Dagobert while his armies are gone south to battle the Malanzas, this alliance might well collapse," Frederic noted.

"Lyonis is still looking for a way to start another bid for the throne," his uncle agreed, sounding pleased. "And Luisa of Segovia is too clever a woman to remain on a sinking boat."

"Yet you'll refuse," the fair-haired boy said.

"Dagobert has daughters as well," Prince Amaury smiled. "A hint of the offer ought to open the dance for blood ties there."

Without soiling Brus' reputation or risking quite so much, Frederic grasped. And as he was young, he would be betrothed yet not wed: betrothals could be broken, should the situation change. Prince Dagobert was a proven military commander besides, in contrast to Princess Aenor's shoddy record there, and marriage alliances from principalities far apart were notoriously unstable besides. Brus and Lange were neighbours, blood ties there would create a powerful bloc in the northwest that might well serve as the foundations for a dynasty in Salia.

"Mind you, in matters of land the most eligible woman in Procer dwells further north," his uncle mused.

"Cordelia Hasenbach," Frederic recited. "Prince of Rhenia, heiress to Hannover."

"Fine soldiers, the people of those lands," Prince Amaury said. "Yet I wager Old Klaus will want his niece wed to one of his kin, so that one child can be a Hasenbach and the other a Papenheim. Lycaonese rarely marry out, regardless."

Frederic put the notion out of his mind, and the Lycaonese as well, as their disdain for playing the Ebb and Flow meant were only ever witnesses to its proceedings. Instead he began to correspond with Perenelle Griffieu, Prince Dagobert's eldest daughter, at the tacit invitation of the man himself. His uncle had, once more, navigated his way to great gains. Perenelle was pleasant enough, and of a certain wry humour that Frederic appreciated, so the cultivated relationship took well. Frederic believed it was in part as a reward for this that Prince Amaury invited him to sit at council when ambassadors from Rhenia were entertained. The expectation was that, with relations tightening between the four Lycaonese principalities, an effort was being made by them to secure better trading rights in the south by

negotiation as a faction. Still, there was opportunity for profit there and there was palpable excitement at the possibility of securing some Lycaonese soldiery as *fantassins*.

Yet there was little discussion of trade, when the ambassador was entertained. Frederic found he agreed with his uncle's scorn when the Rhenian envoys were laughed out of the room. Prince Cordelia Hasenbach – not even a *princess*, that one, northern savagery at its most glaring – had sent warnings of Praesi gold pouring into Procer through brokers, that if civil strife continued unchecked the Principate might well splinter. The ramblings of a young Lycaonese fool, Prince Amaury's councillors dismissed. Prince Klaus Papenheim would have been worth indulging to an extent, if he could be roped in as an ally, but who cared about the dubious doomsday prophecies of some slip of a girl at the edge of the world?

The same councillors advised patience and composure, when the Neustrian army began to muster. There would be raids, they said, as there'd always been raids, but only that. The Lycaonese were a miserly people: they always retreated after a slew of casualties was inflicted, fleeing back north with what little wealth and warmth they'd managed to steal. The garrisons of northern Brus had been thinned to fill the field armies, true, but the fortress walls were tall and well-kept. The Neustrians would retreat soon enough and the House of Goethal would make them pay for their perfidy after Prince Dagobert of Lange became *First Prince* Dagobert of Lange.

When Frederic turned fifteen and the first fortresses fell, though, the silence from the councillors was deafening. Word filtered in from the north and the faced grew darker for it was not the Neustrians alone who'd come: Rhenia, Bremen and Hannover all flew banners as well. The entire north had gone to war, and every day brought word of a fresh defeat as the weakened and surprised defences of Brus utterly collapsed. Prince Amaury Goethal grew sour, his moods darkened, and when Princess Mathilda Greensteel was found to have led a host through the famously treacherous Guiseron swamplands, the aging Prince of Brus led his soldiers out of the city to break her army before it could rejoin with the rest of the Lycaonese. Prince Amaury never returned, his life claimed in single combat by the renowned warrior-prince Manfred Reitzenberg.

Frederic did not yet know this, when he was woken up in the middle of night with a blade to his throat.

"What is the meaning of this?" he indignantly asked the soldier.

"Prince's orders," the man said.

"Prince Amaury?" Frederic blinked, taken aback.

"Prince Nathanael," the soldier smiled as a floor of armed traitors filled the room.

—

The armies of Rhenia and Hannover had marched south with blinding swiftness, Frederic learned, and had begun to prepare for the siege of the city. By then he was in a cell, naturally, but dear Nathanael did like to chat after savaging him. The fair-haired boy of fifteen tasted blood in his mouth as his cousin retreated panting yet bright-eyed, Frederic's bruises having been built on bruises – the pain had been atrocious, at first, now he felt almost divorced from it all. As if he were stranger looking at his own body, at this entire farce.

"Are you weeping?" Nathanael – not Prince Nathanael, never prince, Frederic would rather *choke* on his tongue first – asked, sounding so very pleased.

Was he? The boy blinked, and found tears going down his cheeks. The salt stung his bloody cheekbones, making it impossible to ignore.

"I weep at what you are," Frederic decided, which was untrue but pleasing to say.

"The victor is what I am," his cousin laughed. "But take heart, little usurper. You'll be away from my tender care soon enough."

All pretty things are lies, Frederic thought, and being away from Nathanael would be pretty thing indeed.

"Am I to be executed, then?" the boy said, voice shaking through his nonchalance. "How very predictable."

There was an ugly glint in his cousin's eye at having been denied the pleasure of stripping away hope, but it passed.

"I would never kill one of my own kin, Frederic," Nathanael smiled. "Dear me, cousin, think of my *reputation*. But when I open the gates of the city to Hasenbach, handing you over the Lycaonese as Father's accomplice in foolishly disregarding the offered hand of the savages ought to earn me some trust. I do wonder what manner of grim execution they'll have in mind for you."

Stepping out of this, looking at it like a stranger, Frederic almost admired the wicked man across from him. Nathanael had acted effectively to reclaim the birthright he considered himself unfairly deprived of, seizing the opportunity with both swiftness and ruthlessness. Perhaps, Frederic mused in the most darkly, his cousin was the true Goethal between them after all. Who was the

true child of opportunity, between the one chained and the one standing? His cousin advanced towards him, smiling.

"I'll have you moved to more fitting accommodations and healed," Nathanael mused, patting his cheek. "Do complain I mistreated you, it will do wonders to make you seem a liar."

"You've such a pretty future ahead of you, cousin," Frederic smiled.

Nathanael's hand withdrew, then returned as a slap across the face. Blood filled his mouth again, but Frederic pushed down the pain and gave his tormentor nothing. Why, he was an Alamans prince of the blood: if he was to die, it would be having had the last word.

—

The morning of what was to be Frederic Goethal's last day on Creation, he was woken up by the light coming through the open windows of his old rooms in the palace. He rose without attendants around him, padding all the way to the open glass and letting the warm morning breeze caress his face. There would be no escape from here, he knew. There were guards at the door and in the gardens below, with orders to cripple him should he attempt to flee. But it was such a pleasant morning. Some part of him was not surprised, when he looked at the apple tree across from him and found waiting there the slight silhouette of a kingfisher. It truly was, he thought, a beautiful creature. The long beak and bright plumage, the clever eyes watching him just as he watched them.

"Come to escort me on my way out?" Frederic asked.

The bird looked at him for a long moment, as it had when he'd been a boy. And then it took flight, leaving him with the same taste of esoteric failure in the mouth he'd first tasted as a boy of five.

"Still unworthy, am I?" he bitterly whispered.

Perhaps he was. He'd lost, after all, without ever having lifted a sword. And now he was going to die. And so, as a son of the House of Goethal, he put on his best and combed his hair so that he would at least perish while presentable. The guards that came to get him he did not recognize in the slightest, which meant they were likely *fantassins* hired by his cousin. Was he finding it difficult to secure loyalties? How amusing. Frederic really ought to needle him over it before he was handed over the Lycaonese for execution. Yet when he was ushered into a parlour, there was only one person waiting for him. Mute with surprise, Frederic was served wine and had a pleasant conversation with a very dangerous woman.

"Nathanael Goethal," Cordelia Hasenbach pleasantly told him, "was seventeen thousand thrones in debt to the Pravus Bank. He entertained envoys from them on the day of his 'coronation', seeking further loans."

Cousin Nathanael, Frederic aptly deduced from the context, had been met with an unfortunate accident. Auguste's mental illness made him highly unsuitable to rule, and so the Lycaonese were turning to him as a candidate to secure Brus. He was hardly the only choice, given that there was another branch of Goethals, but he could be said to be the *natural* choice. He was certainly Prince Amaury's heir by right, should the northerners care the slightest whit about upholding these. He could not know, not when those terrifyingly – beautiful – cold blue eyes were studying him without giving away anything going on behind them.

"I owe no debts," Frederic told the fair-haired woman.

"You would owe one," Cordelia Hasenbach coolly corrected.

And thus the game was played, the ancient song of Ebb and the Flow. He could rise, if part of her alliance. So be it.

"My uncle's was a fair death, dealt in open battle," Frederic admitted. "There would be no disgrace in swearing myself to you."

"You misunderstand me, Frederic Goethal," the Prince of Rhenia said.

She was not beautiful in the way that ladies of Brus were, slim and delicate and sophisticated. Prince Cordelia was... regal. It was intoxicating, from up close.

"A crown is not a privilege," Cordelia Hasenbach calmly said, meaning every word, "it is a duty. You will owe a debt to your people, to Procer itself. See it is paid pack in full, Prince Frederic."

Frederic Goethal looked into the blue eyes of the Lycaonese princess and something burned in his blood. Something demanding that, one day, he would get to look there again and find *respect*.

—

Three days after Prince Frederic of Brus was crowned, one of his uncle's councillors praised him for having tricked the Lycaonese brutes and suggested that the principality should now pledge its faith to Princess Aenor of Aequitan in secret. Fredric idly wondered if the man had suggested the same thing to Nathanael, before. He could not quite remember running his sword through the councillor's stomach, but as he ripped it free he cast a cool gaze on the pale-faced men and women he still needed.

For now, anyway.

"Cordelia Hasenbach will be First Prince of Procer," Frederic said, and it rang like an oath.

Never again did any of them speak of treason to him.

The Prince of Brus readied himself for the war that would end the war, the peace by the sword, and brought to heel the commanders sworn to his crown. Even as he did the Lycaonese armies trampled Lange, Lyonis betrayed Prince Dagobert to the northerners without batting an eye and Segovia began negotiating its entry into the alliance before the gates of Lange's capital were even breached. All of Procer trembled at the swift turn in fortunes, the great princesses of the east and the south beginning to muster their armies in fear – fear enough, Frederic knew, that they might just ally long enough to bury the Lycaonese together. But before the Prince of Brus could bring his steel to the Rhenian cause, there was one last matter to see to. One last debt left unbalanced.

When he sent for his father, it was not to receive him the throne room. Frederic ordered for a seat to be brought at the edge of the great pond in the depths of the royal gardens and he sat there, looking out into the water. Herons hunted for fish, ducks slumbered in the shade and an odd peace reigned over the place, as if the chaos and war of the outside world was prevented by some ancient enchantment from reaching here. Robert Goethal was brought to him and his father was visibly miffed by the fact that no seat had been prepared for him, but he held his tongue. Frederic gestured for the guards to withdraw far enough the conversation would remain private.

"Your Grace," Robert Goethal said, bowing.

"Father," Frederic replied.

He said nothing, after. Silence stayed.

"It is a pleasant sight," his father finally said, sparing a glance for the pond.

"Is it?" Frederic mused. "You are right, I suppose. I shall offer you better, however."

He felt the man tighten with anticipation, at the thought of years of patience and offering his own son – his property, in the man's eyes – to his brother. Finally, finally his day in the sun would come.

"There is summer house on the shores of Lake Pavins," the Prince of Brus said. "It has, I am told a most beautiful view. It is yours."

Robert Goethal was not the cleverest of men, but even he would not forget the house he had sent his wife in exile to.

"The death truly *was* an accident, Frederic," his father insisted. "I would not have-"

"And you'd begun so well," Frederic mildly said. "*Your Grace* is the proper address. You will not be reminded again."

The man's mouth closed. Frederic could glimpse the fury in them, the same that would have seen his cheek stinging as a boy. And had he not dreamt, over the years, of the many revenges he would take in this man? Of the torments he would inflict, the pains and humiliations. And yet now he thought of Nathanel's bright eyes as he struck the arrogant boy who'd stolen his birthright, of how righteous he must have felt when unleashing his wrath. And so the fair-haired boy wondered: would he have that same feverish glow in his eye, taking his revenge from Robert Goethal?

"It is a beautiful view," the Prince of Brus repeated. "Though I suppose in time you will tired of it."

"You can't mean to-"

"There will be only one way you are ever allowed to leave that house," Frederic Goethal said, and then he turned to smile at his father. "And that is by going swimming."

He never spoke another word to Robert Goethal.

The Prince of Brus turned his eyes to the pond, after, but there was no flicker of red or blue to be found. He was, it seemed, entirely own his own. But then, was that not ever the way of princes?

—

Frederic Goethal, Prince of Brus, was sixteen years old when he fought his first battle.

It was not a glorious affair: his vanguard accidentally ran into Prince Etienne of Brabant's just north of the fortress of Saregnac, leading to a quick and confused engagement. Frederic followed the advice of his uncle's generals of and of his old teacher Captain Ghyslaine of the *Lances Farfelues*, trading three charges of horse with the Brabantines and getting the better of the last two. It was enough to have the enemy withdraw, as Brabant was fresh to the cause of Constance of Aisne and less than eager to bleed on her behalf. Perhaps three hundred people died on the field, in the span of an hour that Frederic spent mostly trying to find out what was happening. He never even drew his sword. Half a month later he led his retinue in relieving a

Lyonis force further east that'd been ambushed by Brabantines and took three lives in the struggle, two by lance and one by sword.

Soldiers told him, after, that he was one the finest lances in the north and devil in a fight. It surprised him, for steel in hand war was never more than a blur. They were all chewed out by the Iron Prince for having strayed from the planned march and skirmishing unnecessarily ahead of a battle, but the grizzled old general then slapped his back and praised him for being acting decisively. His soldiers took to him after that, as much for the deaths to his name as the praise by a famous general, but Frederic found himself unmoved. Sometimes he thought of the third man he'd killed, up close with his sword. Of how shoddy the equipment had been, of the fear in his eyes when a boy wearing armour worth more than he'd earn in a lifetime had come at him with a *gilded* blade. He thought of it still, astride his horse as thousands upon thousands slowly lined up on the plains to the northwest of the capital of Aisne. There must have been near a hundred thousand men facing them, between the coalition armies of Princess Constance and Princess Aenor.

How many of them were soldiers, instead of shopkeepers in ill-fitting armour?

The Battle of Aisne would be marked as a famous one in the histories of Procer, for it had all the ingredients for exciting interest: one side badly outnumbered, two princes and a princess changing sides halfway through, valour from soldiers of all sides and a clear-cut ending: bloody, overwhelming victory for Cordelia Hasenbach and her allies. Frederic remembered little after he'd dismounted and gone to fight with the ranks, ceding command to more seasoned hands: it was all streaks of blood and mud and sweat, cut through by spurts of crimson. When darkness fell that night he returned to the field, though, to watch the carpet of corpses spreading as far as the eye could see.

"A horse and a fall was all it took," Frederic softly sang, looking at the dead.

He did not hear company approaching until it was close, and belatedly laid his hand on his sword.

"Easy now, princeling," Prince Klaus Papenheim said.

"My apologies, Your Grace," the Prince of Brus said, dipping his head.

"Klaus is enough, after today," the old soldier said. "You fought well."

"Did I?" Frederic murmured.

He could hardly remember. All evening he'd been lauded for having scythed through enemy ranks lance and sword in hand, for his bravery, but they might as well have been singing the praises of another man entirely.

"I was told this would be a glorious thing, Iron Prince," he found himself saying. "I was raised to *fight* this war, to earn acclaim through it. And now..."

He spat on the muddy ground.

"All it took was a horse and fall," the Prince of Brus said, "for us to make ourselves into the great charnel yard of this world."

It was a pretty thing, the dream of Procer. Of the greatest nation of Calernia, proud and powerful and righteous. And like all pretty things, it was a lie. *The ugly truth of us lies on this field, being picked at by carrion under night's veil.* The Prince of Hannover said nothing, standing by his side in silence. Death spread out around them in every direction, like weeds devouring the earth, like an open maw breathing out poison. Frederic felt his throat close, his vision swim. Was it the wind he was hearing, of a chorus of moans whispering: *up and north, south and down, Ebb or Flow, we'll still **drown**.*

"How do you do it?" Frederic croaked out. "How can you see a smile without seeing a skull, how can you sleep? How do you suffer *even an hour*?"

"When I close my eyes," Klaus Papenheim gently replied. "I dream of spring. Of the green in the ground, of the singing rivers, of the fawns on the mountainside. Of the warmth that chases out the cold."

"Springs is the season of war, for your people," Frederic said.

With the melting of the snows the Chain of Hunger came south, even Bruseni knew this.

"And so I open my eyes," Klaus Papenheim said, "knowing I am what stands between war and that dream."

Frederic Goethal closed his eyes and though he dreamt of nothing, he could almost hear the beat of wings. It was not spring, he thought, but it was something. It would have to be enough. The Prince of Brus fought fiercely through the rest of the war, he was told, brought honour to his house and his subjects and the cause he had come to support.

If sometimes his gaze lingered strangely on the kingfisher embroidered on his banner, no one ever said anything of it where he could hear.

—

The same year Cordelia Hasenbach was crowned First Prince of Procer, Princess of Salia, Warden of the West and Protector of the Realms of Man, she received him in a cozy little parlour within the palace that had now become her own. This conversation had been coming for some time, they both knew. Frederic had brought into his circle the last kin he cared to claim and among them his surviving uncle's eldest daughter, Henriette, showed great promise. As an heiress-presumptive, he was satisfied with her. Yet he was young and unwed, and there was no reason he could not have a child of his own siring should the proper wife be found.

"An invigorating brew," Frederic said, after having taken a sip of the offered tea.

"I am fond of the spices," Cordelia Hasenbach said, gracing him with a smile.

It was measured, as were most things with her, but that did not necessarily make it untrue.

"I will not waste too much of your time, Your Highness," Frederic said. "I not unaware that my hand in marriage is not so tempting as some offers you might be entertaining. Still, I can offer hunting and fishing rights for Lycaonese in the swamplands, waiving of all tariffs for your people in Brus and my services as intermediary with *fantassin* companies."

Compared to the full coffers and untouched lands allying with the Milenans of Iserre would bring, the great fleet and foodstuffs that taking Princess Luisa's son Alejandro as a consort would secure or even simply the docile husband, prince and vote in the Assembly that choosing the debt-ridden Louis Rohanon of Creusens would acquire, his suit was hardly worth a second look. The First Prince sipped at her cup, seemingly pensive for all that this should be the easiest decision in the world.

"I had expected," she slowly said, "that you would speak instead of the battles you fought under my banner. Of the support you have given me in the Highest Assembly."

Frederic Goethal still heard the beat of wings when he closed his eyes. Even now, and perhaps he would until the day he died. But when they were open, sometimes he glimpsed spring and it bore the face of Cordelia Hasenbach. She was knitting back together a realm decades in the wounding, one step at time, running roughshod over southern royalty in the Assembly just as her armies had over theirs in the field. She did it so politely, though, that half the time they'd not even noticed it happened.

"That I cannot offer you now," Frederic said, "for it was already promised to the payment of another debt."

He would not quibble now and pretend the woman seated across from him was the not the best thing to happen to Procer in many years. This time, he thought, there was less measure to the smile she offered him.

"I do not intend to wed, Prince Frederic," the First Prince gently said. "But if I did, the words you just spoke would have made you a finer suitor than any other I have entertained."

The moment passed and though he left that parlour as unmarried as he expected to, Frederic found he'd somehow been eased into a rather lucrative arrangement to transport steel into Neustria that would nicely fill the coffers of Brus. And likely quiet any talk back home of ungrateful Rhenians, he realized with a start of amusement as he returned to the Goethal manse in the city. It seemed, though, that he was not to be freed of politics for the day: before evening came, he was called on unexpectedly by another royal. Prince Amadis Milenan of Iserre was a rising man these days: wealthy, ambitious and not afraid to use the former in the service of the latter. He was handsome enough, Frederic found as they sat together and drank a lovely Creusens white by the window, yet there was something about him... *For this impiety, the Gods Above punished them*, he heard in his mother's voice, telling the old story again, *turning their three sons into beasts. The eldest into a wolf, the youngest into a bird...*

Amadis Milenan smiled and complimented Frederic's deeds at the Battle of Aisne.

And the second into a snake, the Prince of Brus finished in the privacy of his own thoughts. Oh, there was a forked tongue behind that smile. Prince Amadis spoke of the peace, of the many changes the First Prince was bringing to Salia. Some, perhaps, were ill-advised. Brought by ignorance – quite understandable, if unfortunate – of the way things were done, here in the south. The Prince of Iserre spoke of the great costs of war, of keeps that need be rebuilt from the ravages of Lycaonese warmaking, of trade arties disrupted and merchants yet afraid. Amadis Milenan spoke then of his daughters, the second oldest of which was yet unwed, and of the trust that could only be had by ties of blood in these uncertain times. Did gratitude not fade so very quickly? Why, was the Prince of Brus himself not unwed? *You are everything my uncle wanted to be and more*, Frederic thought, admiring, but also: *how many shopkeepers would you force into ill-fitting armour, to get even a step closer to the throne?*

"You speak such pretty things to me," Frederic said, "Alas, I must confess my heart has been broken. I simply cannot conceive of marriage until such grief has passed."

Amadis Milenan's pleasantness trailed down his face like rainwater.

"Hasenbach's hound to the end, then," the Prince of Iserre coldly said.

Every time you speak, Frederic kept himself from saying, *I can almost hear a thousand corpses from the fields of Aisne singing that same old refrain*. The fair-haired prince laughed, instead.

"Woof," Frederic solemnly replied. "I expect you can find your way out, Prince Amadis."

He did not bother to watch the man leave. On the windowsill, looking at him, was perched a kingfisher.

"You are far from home, old friend," the Prince of Brus smiled.

The bird considered him, for a long moment, and then trilled once before flying away. Frederic kept looking at the sky long after, in startled fear and delight.

It was the first time one had ever sung for him.

—

Frederic Goethal sometimes thought he'd been born to fight a war, but it'd simply not been the one he'd fought.

The Tenth Crusade seemed like it might just be that war, he mused years later. The Dread Empire's conquest and rule of Callow was a blemish on the face of Calernia, and it seemed like the old beast's hunger was not yet sated: a city had been slaughtered, some sort of fearsome doomsday fortress raised by a rebel Praesi noble and a fresh madness of undeath unleashed on the world. A hundred thousand 'wights', Gods save them all. Yet the talk in the Highest Assembly, at the edges of conversation where truths were whispered instead of lies proudly proclaimed, was not of *liberation*. Promises were being made of fiefdoms carved in the Kingdom of Callow, and it left a foul taste in his mouth. He yet remembered the endless stretches of death after Aisne, the cloying choking smell of rotting flesh, and he would not brave this once more to repeat old mistakes by new hands. Not even for Cordelia Hasenbach.

The Callowans rallied behind the Black Queen, on the other side of the mountains, armies and knights and fresh devilries coming fresh out of the earth with every stomp of her feet. They too glimpsed a spring when they closed their eyes, Frederic thought when he heard, and Procer had no part in it. That dream was a dangerous thing to fight against.

He sent one of his kin to command the Bruseni contingent he'd pledged to the crusade, pulling strings so that it would be under the trusted command of Klaus Papenheim where he would be able to learn the trade of war without too much risk. The greater part of Brus' army, though, he kept home. He may yet march it east when the war against the Wasteland began in earnest, and he took to formally preparing his cousin and heiress Henriette to hold a command should it be so, but instead the invading armies of the Principate were struck by disaster north and south. Prince Amadis had been beaten and taken prisoner, Rozala Malanza retreating west with the salvaged remains of that army, while the Red Flower Vales had held and instead spat out the Carrion Lord so that he might ravage the heartlands while the Iron Prince dug his way back into Callow. Madness and chaos, all the while Ashur played pirate against the Wasteland's coasts and the Dominion dragged its feet.

Frederic ordered the army of Brus readied, upon reading the letters from his people in Salia, but one more letter came before he moved south to fight for the restoration of order. *The Dead King marches, it said. Hannoven has fallen. All soldiers make for Twilight's Pass. Ready yourself.* So wrote the brisk hand of Prince Manfred Reitzenberg, who had years ago slain Frederic's uncle and predecessor. Something in him shivered, when he read the words. A primal fear, an ancient terror bred in the bones of men. *The Dead King marches*, he thought, and the world shivered with him. Doom had come for Procer, had already swallowed Hannoven while its armies were fighting far south. So were those of Neustria, and while both Rhenia and Bremen would bring reinforcements the Lycaonese had still been stripped of great strength and their finest general.

"North," Prince Frederic of Brus told his captains, dropping the letter on the table. "We march north."

—

The Bruseni made haste, but the Prince of Bremen was dead by the time their host arrived.

So was the Princess of Bremen that followed him and the Princess of Bremen that followed *her*, all dying in the span of same night carrying out the same unflinching charge. Now only one of the House of Reitzenberg remained, bearing a red crown: Otto Reitzenberg, dour and brooding and so transparently haunted by the thought he might not be equal to the duty he had taken on. Frederic sympathized, yet only so much. The first time he stood on the snowy grounds to meet the dead, steel at his back and the back sea of the Enemy's horde in front, he closed his eyes and smiled. Terror should have swelled in his breast, for the armies of Keter made those of the Great War seem like the mischief of children, but instead it felt like he was breathing fresh air for

the first time in his life. The banner of his house flew high, the sun shone bright and even the cold felt *crisp*.

The dead came and somehow Frederic laughed.

The strange joy that'd taken hold of him, though, had not spread throughout his soldiers. In their eyes he saw fear, for this was not a foe they had faced before and it was not a foe anyone with any sense would ever want to face. It was his duty, as their prince, to replace that fear with something else. Frederic dismounted, to show he would fight with the foot that would not be able to flee if the tide turned, and in silence of the mountain pass raised his voice to address his own.

"I see fear in you," Frederic Goethal called out. "I offer no scorn for it, for what sane man would blame you? Is it not a thing of horror, this army of the damned?"

Corpses and monsters and worse, legions dark and darkly led.

"But I tell you now, there is nothing to be afraid of," the Prince of Brus. "I have already killed you all."

The murmurs bloomed, uneasy.

"You stand at the edge of the world, sons and daughters of Brus," Frederic said. "There is nothing but doom waiting beyond the horizon, and with every beat of your hearts it crawls closer to you."

And in the distance, as if to prove him right, the dead quickened their pace.

"And yet there is nothing to fear," the Prince of Brus continued, "for you are all dead and I share a grave with you. So I'll not offer you gold or glory or even honour – what are these worth to a corpse?"

He could feel in the air, now, and they must too. The weight, the scent of steel about to be drawn.

"Instead I tell you this: we can claw our lives back from this day. All it takes, Bruseni, is to *win*."

His voice rang out against the mountain pass, defiant.

"Win, and tomorrow you will be alive," Frederic Goethal said. "Win tomorrow, and you will push back death by one more day. Every victory claws back one more hour, one more song, one more cup of wine."

He bared his sword, raised it high, and ten thousand blades rose with it,

"There will come a day," the Prince of Brus roared, "where we who stand beneath the banner of the kingfisher will falter. Where our swords break, our shields splinter and valour flickers out like a candle in the dark. Where the Enemy, at long last, keeps our deaths clutched too tightly too steal back."

He laughed, bright and merry and somehow he could feel the fear in them vanishing like morning mist.

"But I ask you, Bruseni, you children of opportunity – is today that day?"

No, they screamed. No, they thundered, until it echoed down the pass.

"To doom," he screamed back, "and glorious death!"

Doom, they screamed back, and glorious death. These loyal fools who had followed him north to seek out the end of days and *fight* it. It was like a shiver that went through all of them, a fearsome and intoxicating pride. *We are here, King of Death*, they sang with every swing of the blade as they drove back the dead, *we are here, so is this the best you can do?*

Frederic closed his eyes, just before the lines collided, and found he could not hear even the slightest echo of the song he'd caught in the wind after Aisne.

—

From that day onwards, it was a dazzling dance of defeats with three men leading the beat: somber Otto and smiling Frederic against the Dead King, the pair never more than a missed turn or step away from utter annihilation. Otto Redcrown grew on him, for the hesitant kindness behind the rough manners and the solemn honour the man refused to surrender even an inch of no matter how dark the days grew- and the days grew dark indeed, for all that the nights were even darker. Yet it was when Volsaga fell and the two of them together hammered an iron farewell into the side of the mountain pass that Otto Reitzenberg ceased being an ally and became a friend instead. He was, Frederic decided, the kind of man it would be a pleasure to die with.

Loss after loss they were driven back to the Morgentor, Morning's Gate, the last fortress between death and lowlands of the north. The last gate between Keter and the Principate. And when even that last redoubt seemed about to fail, in that last hour the dead withdrew: truce had been forged, a breath before the last plunge. It was a magnificent courtesy that the Black Queen had extended, Frederic mused. When death came, it would be after he'd had time to properly arrange welcome for it: he and Otto ran themselves ragged, preparing for the end of the three months. Preparing themselves, Frederic sometimes thought, to die in the

full splendour of their ruinous pride. And so when the truce ended, when the dead came again, Frederic Goethal was ready to perish slightly drunk on fine wine and exquisitely dressed, as was only proper for a prince of the House of Goethal.

They lost the eastern peak first, then the western. Frederic fought in the same red haze he'd always known for the last peak, the last standing stones in the way of the King of Death, and he knew deep down that he was going to die. For he had met the snake, in the heart of Procer, but now he knew at last the true face of the wolf: hunger unceasing, death that would swallow whole the world. This was the last of his story, the death that could not be snatched back, and he found himself at peace with the notion. And yet in that smoky stairway where the dead howled and soldiers died, among the torches and the flashing lights of desperate sorcery, Frederic Goethal caught sight of wings in red and blue.

"One last time, is it?" the Prince of Brus smiled, strangely moved.

His blood burned. Yes, he decided. One last time, in the face of the end of the world. He sent for his horse, for his riders that the Lycaonese had taken to calling the Kingfishers, and *up* the stairs they rode.

"Doom," Frederic screamed, chasing the beat of wings, and they screamed it with him.

Through death and fire they charged, a whirlwind of steel and hooves, until the dead broke and Frederic Goethal found himself at the summit of the peak under the morning sun. The kingfisher trilled, but the sun blinded his sight, and when he could see again he found only one of his own banners trailing in the wind. But now, oh now...

The Kingfisher Prince smiled. They won, and so the day after they were alive.

It was a pretty thing and it was not a lie.

—

In Brus there was a story every child knew, about the birth of kingfishers.

Charlatan I

"Where there is cause for wonder, there is cause for fear. Only through faith and rectitude can the Talent be mastered instead of master."

— Jaquinus the Elder, Proceran monk and scholar

Olivier hadn't meant to end up the family disappointment, but then he supposed no one did.

His parents were not unkind about it, as they were not unkind people, but by age eleven Olivier's eyes and ears could no longer deny what his heart had been whispering for years. The irony of it was, of course, that in most places being the sole member of his family born without the Talent would have been seen as blessing instead of a failing. Not out here, though. Beaumarais was one of those hundreds of border villages that the rulers of the Principality of Bayeux, the House of Chavarel, only ever remembered existed around tax season and then promptly forgot again. The people hardly minded, as the town had been raised in lands that had been claimed by both the Principate and the Kingdom of Callow for as long as either had existed, nestled in a swamp long gone dry. The people of Beaumarais were loyal House Chavarel and the high throne in Salia, of course, though that loyalty's ebb and flow tended to be somewhat related to the latest tax rates and whether Callowan raiders had been sighted that spring.

Out here the people were a practical lot, even the priests from the House of Light who'd managed to cross someone influential enough to be assigned here to languish in obscurity, so having a few wizards around was counted as a boon instead of courting disaster. You never knew when you might need a few fireballs tossed at bandits or a brew concocted that'd see to whatever was sickening the sheep. Olivier's parents were both practitioners, his grandfather having been one as well and his mother having served as the man's apprentice along his father. The continued exercise of magic had seen their family grow into one of the prominent ones of Beaumarais, allowed a seat in the town council and earning enough coin that they'd been able to afford a small alchemy laboratory and their pick of what few books travelling peddlers brought for the family library. Olivier, as the eldest, had naturally been expected to continue the family trade.

Until they'd learned he did not have the Talent.

Were these older days, the boy could have redeemed this lack by taking up a spear and becoming one of the town's militia officers. Olivier's ability to read and write likely ensured he'd rise in rank after a few years, should he not prove an utter craven. But these days it was the Dread Empire that held the Vermilion Valleys – what easterners called the Red Flower Vales – and the people of Beaumarais had found the Praesi to be more peaceful neighbours than their predecessors. The Legions of Terror did not sally out from the old mountain fortresses to raid, the way the riders of the Counts of Ankou had under Fairfax rule, which meant people had begun grumbling about paying for a militia that spent most its time drinking in taverns and chasing skirts instead of guarding anything. The mayoress had dismissed

near half their number, and those that remained were all real veterans or from better families than Olivier's own. There was no future for him in the militia as an officer, and hardly even as living decoration holding a spear.

That had only been the beginning of his troubles.

It had been one thing for the eleven-year-old boy to know he did not have the Talent, but a harder one altogether to realize he did not have any *talents*. His parents had sent him out a few weeks with Old Alphonse, the perpetually short-handed shepherd outside town, and he'd somehow lost both the sheepdog and half the flock. A fortnight under Mistress Caroline, the town blacksmith, had taught him that while he deeply enjoyed taking things apart to see how they worked, left alone with a hammer and anvil he was more likely to break a finger than straighten a kitchen knife. The Codenault brewers, one of the few families in Beaumaraais with a last name and allegedly noble kin as well, had only agreed to teach him the trade if he was betrothed to their three year old daughter, took their name and his family began providing some herbs at a rate that was Callowan robbery. They'd been turned down by his parents more for the last condition than the rest, Olivier had come to suspect. For two summers in a row he was thrown at anyone that might deign to teach him, only to be spat out like a sour apple seed within a few days every single time.

Olivier the Jinx, some people had taken to calling him behind his back. Those who kept more closely to the House of Light muttered about it being the just comeuppance for the public impiety – to be understood as meaning *magic* – of his parents, which had been harder still to swallow.

Most days it seemed like the only thing Olivier was any good at was reading. He'd taken to both letters and numbers swiftly, and in those days where his parents had still believed he might have the Talent they'd always praised his ability to understand and recall whatever it was he read perfectly. *You'll make a fine wizard someday, with a mind like that*, Mother had been fond of saying. The boy had been methodically going through every book in the family library ever since he could recall. He'd read through it all, whether they bestiaries, histories, alchemical primers or even his favourite, the precious first tome of the ten making up the *Louvroy Encyclopediae*. There was not a thing under the sun between beginning with a letter between A and C he did not have some knowledge of. And the truth was that, even after it was known he was without magic, his parents had encouraged his erudition. It was only proper, given his family's trade, and once a week he was even allowed to light a candle to keep reading after dark.

A few days after he turned eleven, though, for the first time in his life Olivier found himself denied a book.

"There'd no need for that, lad," Father said, clapping his shoulder. "Best you spend your time helping your mother around the house, the sooner she finishes the sooner she can start brewing."

"I'll read only after chores are done, then," Olivier promised. "I wanted to borrow the Herbal Compendium now so that I wouldn't have to disturb you later."

His father sighed, withdrawing the hand.

"Roland's apprenticeship begins today," he said. "I won't be lending you books anymore, Olivier, save those that are for entertainment. A wizard must have a broad mind and that means reading as much as one can, especially when still young. I won't indulge you to his detriment."

Olivier's little brother was nine years old. He was quick and clever and charming, so all who knew him said, and good with his hands. Three days ago, he'd also set accidentally set fire to a bush after being stung by a bee. He had the Talent, and it ran powerfully in him: it'd taken years for Mother to be able to form a ball of flame while Roland had done it by accident.

In that moment, Olivier saw the years spreading out before him: his brother always in the light, him ever in the shadow.

In that moment Olivier grasped a heartbreaking truth: his own parents saw him doing the only thing he was good at as an *inconvenience*.

Olivier the Jinx had struck again.

He ran out of the house, and though Father called out the man did not follow.

—

The townsfolk called the small valley the Knightsgrave.

Legend had it that, on those very grounds, hundreds of years ago a band of militiamen had stood their ground against a charge of Callowan knights with only spears and pitchforks. They would have lost to the mighty riders, though, had the small river at the heart of the valley not suddenly swelled up and swept over the knights. Unhorsed, the knights been slaughtered to a man while they stumbled around in the mud in their heavy armour. The continuing swell of the river had forced back the militiamen, though, and they'd had to abandon the corpses in the valley as they fled the water. The story went that deep in the riverbed the

armoured knights were buried in graves of mud, awaiting only the day they were dug up. Whatever the truth of it, it had become tradition for the daring among the town's children to sneak out during summer nights and plant seeds of red anemones by the river banks to honour the ancient victory – and prove neither wolves nor ancient ghosts were enough to scare you.

Decades and decades of that practice had seen the Knightsgrave turning into a stirringly beautiful sight by night: a small valley split by a quiet mountain spring, bordered on the slopes by tall grass touched by droplets shimmering under the moonlight, the green turning red as anemones and marigolds grew thick closer to the waters. It was considered bad luck to let cattle graze where dead had been buried, so the people of Beaumaraais had left the valley largely untouched. Olivier had gone there, after he'd run out, as he simply did not know where else to go. He had a few friends in town, but none so close that their family would host him should his parents ask for his return. Gods, if they even asked for his return. Perhaps he was going to stay here forever, he thought as he lay down on a bed of red flowers, eating wild berries and drinking from mountain springs. It was cold out, but it need not be: from his failed apprenticeship under Old Alphonse he'd learned how to make a fire with little but sticks and stones.

The stars twinkled above him, and Olivier wondered what it was he was meant to do. He was drowning, in Beaumaraais. In his own family. He was drowning and he saw no way out.

The sound of the tall grass being passed through woke him from his glum reverie, Olivier rising to his feet and closing his fingers around a sharp stone. If wolves were out hunting around here there would have been howling, which he'd not heard, but wolves were not the only dangerous thing to lurk in the Vermillion Valleys after sundown. Except that it was not a beast lurking out there but something entirely worse: his little brother. Roland emerged from the greens looking a little harried but otherwise fine, gaze sweeping the valley and finding Olivier within moments. He cursed, but it would have been petulant to run when his own blood had come out to find him. The older brother tossed his rock into the river, helplessly, and sat back down amongst the flowers. Nine years old, and Roland had made it to the Knightsgrave. Olivier had been ten when he'd done it. Was there even a single thing his brother was not better at? Gods, it must be some sort of sin to be so furiously envious of your own blood. Roland stepped up carefully, and eventually sat down at his side.

"I'm sorry," the other boy said.

Olivier breathed out.

"It's not your fault," he said. "I'm not even sure it's theirs."

Yet it is not mine, either, he wanted to scream up at the moon, *so why am I suffering for it?*

"If I lend you the book in secret, they can't stop us," Roland offered.

"It's not about the book," Olivier tiredly replied. "It's about what it means that they refused."

"I'm not going to throw you out just because you don't have the Talent, Ollie," Roland softly said. "When the house is mine, it'll be yours too. Family keeps."

I don't want to just be your family, Olivier thought. *I want to be someone.* But that was a lie, wasn't it? He looked up at the round eye of the moon in the sky above, the sea of stars spreading as far as he could see, and Olivier felt small. More than anything, he wanted to have magic. Not for what it would bring him but for what it would bring to the eye of Mother and Father when they looked at him. So here he was now, tears in his eyes sitting by the side of the brother he was so ashamed to resent, and he wondered if that was to be the sum whole of him. A bitter husk of a person, forever envious of what others held that he did not. And Gods forgive him, but was there not so *much* to envy? The Talent most of all, but also all the other things where he always seemed to fail where others succeeded.

It would swallow him whole, Olivier realized. It would twist him into something ugly, if he let it.

Moonlight bearing down on the both of them, he cast a look at his younger brother and found that Roland was shivering from the cold. His short-sleeved woolen shirt was not meant for the cool nights of the valleys. He felt a surge of affection for his little brother, then, who'd braved darkness, cold and treacherous mountain paths to seek him out when their own parents could not be bothered. He could choose, Olivier knew, to resent Father and Mother for this. For the callous indifference of assuming he would return, cowed and knowing not to act out like this again. Or he could choose to love Roland, instead, for having come. It was such a small thing, such a small choice. And yet it felt like the whole world, right now. *What is it you want to rule you, Olivier of Beaumaraais?* he asked himself.

He took his brother's hand.

"Let's find our way back," Olivier decided. "Together."

Under the silent gaze of the sea of stars they went home, hands clutched tight like they were the only people left in the world.

It had lit a fire in him, the crossroads he had glimpsed that night.

There was no other way for Olivier to describe the vigor that'd grown in him from that evening onwards, the way he woke up rested and eager to seize the day where before mornings had been a slog. His parents caned him four times for having run away, but he stepped forward when Father mulled disciplining Roland the same way – they'd gotten caught coming back in, though consequences had waited for morning. He took those two canes for his brother, and part of him felt only disgust at the approving look in his father's eye as he dealt the blows. *I do not do this for you*, he thought, but kept his mouth shut. That same afternoon, Roland smuggled him the Herbal Compendium and they sat together in the sun as his bruised back ached: turning pages when they were both finished reading, and not a moment sooner. It would not be enough, Olivier, knew, to simply read. If his parents had no future to offer him, he would have to make his own.

"I won't forget," Roland whispered when Father came looking and they had to part.

His little brother's eyes had gone flinty, even as he spoke.

"I won't forget that you took the blows," Roland whispered, then his eyes turned to the house. "Or who dealt them out."

They were children, the two of them, but in these parts children grew swiftly. Those were not idle words.

Yet for all that, the path ahead suddenly seemed brighter. Roland took to his studies with exceptional ability, though Father said his true calling lay in elemental magics and not subtler branches like alchemy or healing. He did, however, display a burgeoning talent for enchantment that had their parents utterly delighted: neither of them had good skill in it, but it was known to be the single most lucrative way to practice sorcery. Their joys in teaching their younger son had them keeping only the lightest of eyes on the older, which was the way Olivier preferred it. It allowed him the right to spend his hours as he wished, so long as chores were seen to in the morning. He began by knocking at Master Laurent's door, the man who was the mayoress' brother and the town scribe. Master Laurent had no interest in training a boy of another family in his skills when he had two daughters of his own to pass down the trade to, naturally, but Olivier already knew how to write.

What he offered, instead, was to serve as the man's copier.

Books were rare this far out – the closest city, Apenun, was two weeks away on horse – and what the peddlers brought was fought over by the two literate families in Beaumaraais. Transcribing a book would be difficult work, requiring a good writing hand and

attention to detail as well as many hours to sink into the work. It'd also be somewhat expensive to even try, given the sparsity of parchment, but if anyone in the town had any to spare it was Master Laurent. The older man was intrigued by the offer, as Olivier had thought he might be. His eldest daughter would be the one taught the written courtesies and forms necessary to see to the town's sparse formal correspondence with the taxman and the few dignitaries who might claim to have some right or responsibility over the town, but the scribe had another child. Finding her a good trade that would not conflict with her older sister's must have been a tempting prospect.

"Clever," Master Laurent said, dark eyes sharp. "Yet risky and costly to attempt. And you are not needed for it, strictly speaking."

The man had books of his own, after all.

"I am, if you want to be able to copy any of the books in my family's library," Olivier replied.

"I am not a fool, boy," the scribe sharply said. "They do not let those out of the house, it is well-known."

Olivier, in lieu of a retort, recited the first two pages of the first tome of the Louvroy Encyclopediae by rote without once hesitating, stumbling or missing a single detail. The three hours he'd spent with Roland practicing his pronunciation had paid off, he saw on the older man's face.

"I'll want to see a page's worth of your hand first," Master Laurent finally said, "and my younger daughter Elise will share in the work."

So this was what it felt like, Olivier thought, to win.

—

When peddlers came that spring, after the snows melted, for the first time since Beaumaraais' founding they were books waiting to be sold to them.

Two copies of the same alchemical primer – it was both short and rare – as well as single manuscript of the lengthier *Annals of Bayeux* by the famous monk-historian Brother Lucien. The primers went for ten silvers each and the *Annals* for sixteen. As per their arrangement, as both a source of books and a copier the now twelve-year-old Olivier made a copper on every silver, leaving him with twenty-six copper coins filling his pocket. Master Laurent, even after the costs of ink and parchment were considered, had made a profit almost equivalent to half a year's worth of scribing. Olivier began to be invited at the town scribe's house for meals, Mayoress Suzanne referred to him as a

promising young man the sole time she visited her brother for supper. Careful inquiries were made as to whether he got along well with Elise and as to what his marriage prospects were.

Elise was a sharp girl, and though not as lovely as her older sister she was quite lovely enough for anyone, but Olivier did not intend to spend the rest of his life copying manuscripts. Though he made it known that his winter hours were theirs for the taking at the same arranged rate as before, a few days after he received his coppers he parted with two for the right to hitch on peddler's wagon all the way to Ploncheau, the nearest town to the east. One meal a day included, if he kept watch and fetched firewood for the peddler, which he agreed to without hesitation. He'd sought the permission of his parents before leaving, and they'd granted it almost eagerly. Suggestions were several times made that he seek a position in Ploncheau's militia while he was there. Roland clutched him tight, and unlike their parents actually asked why he needed to go.

"Last autumn," Olivier whispered back, "remember when the mayor of Ploncheau visited?"

"To warn about the werewolf and trade some goods," Roland agreed.

"And to get two dozen documents written by our town scribe," Olivier said. "Testaments, a request for the seneschal to repair a road, all things we have Master Laurent handle for us."

"They don't have a scribe," Roland caught on, but his face fell. "Are you leaving?"

"I'll be back before summer's end," Olivier reassured him. "I'm just selling them something."

"Selling them what?" Roland asked, frowning in confusion. "You don't own anything."

"Literacy," the older brother smiled.

The journey was to Ploncheau short and pleasant, two days and nights spent in the company of the most well-travelled man Olivier had ever met. The peddler was free with stories, and pleasant in demeanour. They parted on good terms, and with Olivier having put to memory the way to Ploncheau. Between that, the meals and the stories the coppers felt well spent. Knowing better than to bite the hand that fed him, when Olivier went to the mayor and offered to teach one of the townsfolk how to read and write he offered nothing that Master Laurent might have earned coppers for. Most of the rules of formal correspondence and legal documents were unknown to him, besides. Mayor Guy of Ploncheau was quick to recognize the advantages in being able to read received letters and for the town to keep its own records, though, so after that all that was left was the haggling. Five

months later, having been offered free room and board by the Mayor as he taught his oldest son to read and write, Olivier hitched a ride back to Beaumaraais with ten silvers in his pocket and a sickly young goat in his arms.

The goat he traded to another peddler for a faded hand-drawn map of the villages and roads of the region as well as a pot of ink and a nice roll of scraped vellum. The vellum went some way in thawing the rather cool reception he received from Master Laurent at his return, and a precise description of what exactly he'd taught the mayor's son further warmed relations. Olivier returned to his little brother with a map and more than a few stories, the two of them laughing at tales of their months apart swapped back and forth in a quiet corner.

Mother and Father were disappointed to hear he'd been unable to find a position in the Ploncheau militia.

Olivier copied manuscripts during the day, and when he dreamt at night the fire in his belly only burned brighter.

—

By the age of fifteen, Olivier was surprised to find himself moderately wealthy.

He'd ventured out four more times to trade literacy for silver and goods, seeing his savings grow and his reputation with them. On the second of those trips the town scribe whose monopoly he threatened by teaching another family's daughter how to do rival records sent a few ruffians to beat him halfway to death and steal the payment. The fools chased him into a mountain pixie nest without knowing they would get riled up by the noise, though, and more importantly that rubbing bilberry juice against one's skin would keep them away. Bilberries, according to Sister Ostace's ponderous *Common Bestiary of the Parish*, was poisonous to the little creatures and so they fled the smell. The toughs fled back to town with swollen faces, and after hesitating Olivier returned to lay accusations. The roughs were threatened with a beating by the mayor and swiftly began pointing fingers, which gave Olivier right to make demands of reparation.

Sensing an opening, he passed the right over to the leading brother of the House of Light, to the visible approbation of many townsfolk: the scribe was forced to apologize and match the silver reward he'd tried to have stolen. More importantly, a charmed Brother Albert from the House wrote him a letter of commendation worth more than everything else he'd gotten that trip. The piece of parchment singing his praises marked him as a friend of the House of Light, who should be received as a guest in any temple. It would open so many doors it really ought to be called a key.

The fourth venture saw the first time he ran into bandits, though they called themselves a company of *fantassins* in the employ of the Prince of Bayeux, simply collecting tolls on his behalf. They took what few copper coins he had on him as well as his writing implements, but Olivier bargained for the latter back when he offered to write for them an official contract of employment with the prince that they might show... doubters. *Just so that unthinking violence might be avoided*, he told them. They agreed eagerly, though much was taken on trust as none of them could read. Two months later, a troop of horsemen from Apenun caught them on flat grounds and killed them to a man, having been out looking for them. Olivier had, after all, noted on the piece of parchment that the bandits were not *fantassins*, had boasted of taking coin from the Dread Empire and that anyone reading this ought to see it as their patriotic duty to report these facts to the authorities in Apenun. Eventually a peddler must have seen the 'contract', he assumed, and brought word back to the city in hope of a reward.

Olivier's own reward came when the horsemen rode into Beaumaraais a week later and their highborn commander asked for him by name. The man revealed his trick to the befuddled townsfolk and added that the last line of the 'contract' was in fact Olivier noting exactly how much copper had been taken from him by robbery, then politely requesting that the sum be returned to him should the bandits be brought to justice. The nobleman returned him the coin, amused and impressed, then threw in a silver for his 'laudable honesty'. Ironical, considering that when writing Olivier had added a copper to the sum actually stolen to account for the way he felt personally inconvenienced. The soldiers stayed for a few days more, and though most people these days were buying him drinks and calling him Witty Ollie – a pleasant change, he mused, from Olivier the Jinx – the sudden fame was not enough to blind him to the way that the highborn officer, Captain Alain, was regularly visiting the Beaumaraais House of Light.

The soldier did not seem all that pious, which only added to the mystery. Still, Olivier found little occasion to pursue the affair and had other preoccupations besides: he would have to venture much further out if he was to keep his teaching scheme, and the returns would be diminishing. Best to move on to something else, but what?

"You've some coin, now," Roland said. "And I can enchant passably. We could open a shop together."

His little brother, now thirteen, had grown by leaps and bounds. They were near of a height with each other, though Roland's cocksure grin and quick laughter had seen him grow popular with the town girls – and even some boys – in a way that Olivier's plainer looks had never quite managed. Kissing games and fumbling under clothes were the least of what Roland had been up to,

though. As he'd said, he was now capable of enchanting appropriately prepared granite stones to glow like lamps for up to three weeks, and the enchantment could be rejuvenated repeatedly afterwards for perhaps up to a year before the stone crumbled. About half the time he could make a blade immune to rust for six turns of the moon, and he was beginning to work on enchanting iron rings to put vermin like rats and insects to flight.

"Not as long as you live under their roof," Olivier said.

"Buy a shop and we can live in it together," Roland insisted.

"There's still much you can learn from them," he told his younger brother. "Finish your learning first, Roland. I'll still be there when you're finished."

They argued over it several times after, but Olivier did not budge. The notion of a shop, though, remained with him. The question was of what he had to offer. Already he'd learned that one could make their own trade, their own way if the old ways failed them – but what manner of a shop would he be able to make and man? Before he could settle the matter in his mind, however, his peaceful life was troubled by something rather more urgent. On a sunny autumn morning, Sister Maude of the town's House of Light came knocking at their door with three armed men in livery.

She bore with her an ultimatum: Olivier's family was to cease practicing sorcery for coin, or it would be expelled from town.

Charlatan II

"To be a mage is to seek to master yourself so that through this you might master the world around you."

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

Sister Maude left after delivering her ultimatum, as if it were done thing, and behind her chaos erupted within Olivier's family.

Father was hesitant, Mother belligerent and Roland seemingly just in deep shock. It occurred to the Olivier that, until this moment, no one had ever really made it clear to his younger brother that magic could be seen as anything but good. He was not certain whether he should be glad of that or not: sometimes callouses were for your own good. Olivier's parents began to argue, Mother talking about calling in favours and rousing the town while Father called it black madness, talking instead of trying a bribe. Olivier led away his little brother, who did not need to see or hear any of this, bringing him to his room. The shouting could be heard through the door, but he was no magician to be able to solve that.

"Ollie, what are we going to do?" Roland quietly asked. "We can't fight the priests, Father's right."

There was no denying *that*, Olivier thought. The temple in Beaumaraais was nothing impressive, a simple house of stone with pretty side gardens holding within a small cloister that served as both a hostel for travellers and lodgings for the few lay brothers and sisters who occasionally spent a handful of seasons here. Sister Maude was a stout woman in her forties, who rumour placed on the wrong side of a political squabble in the faraway city of Maupin to the west – a month and a half away by horse – as explanation for why such an obviously well-educated priestess had been sent to a border town like theirs. The men in House livery she'd brought with her were lay brothers reportedly from Apenun, the kind that came here in a retreat for a year before returning, and besides a young woman and an old one they were the only other people of the House in Beaumaraais.

It wasn't that physically the priestess and her fellows couldn't be run out of town. Sister Maude's grasp on Light was weak and she was not in great shape, while none of the others could call on the blessings of Above. Father alone using what few dangerous spells he knew would be able to clear out the lot of them fairly handily. The trouble was that the House of Light stood behind them, and the House could not be threatened or bullied: if Sister Maude was sent packing, she'd be back in three months with a dozen priests and a company of horsemen from Apenun. There might even be a royal magistrate with them, someone who'd be empowered to seize property and pass judgements. If it came to that, Olivier's family would lose everything they owned in the span of moments.

In principle, the ancient rights of all Procerans colloquially known as *Salienta's Graces* meant that not even a prince could take a single blade of grass from a farmer without the matter being brought to an elected magistrate and the law being made to speak. In practice, though, royal magistrates – those appointed by the authority of the royal house, if rarely by the ruling prince personally – were allowed to ignore the Graces and render judgement when it came to treason, heresy and royal dues. Out here in the Valleys there was no elected magistrate anyway. Not enough people to warrant it. It was the ones in Apenun that received petitions, but none had come out as far as Beaumaraais in living memory. And should Sister Maude call in a royal magistrate over 'heresy', though, even appealing there wouldn't do a damned thing.

They stuck together, all these powerful sorts, like a covenant of foxes running the henhouse.

"There has to be more to this," Olivier told his brother quietly. "Our arrangements with the House have been holding for more than

two decades now, why force what will be an unpopular measure? Something must have happened."

"I know Mother met with someone quietly and after nightfall, about a week back," Roland said, frowning.

"To sell green brews, you think?" Olivier asked, brow rising. "She doesn't know any recipe that'd bring down heresy charges on our heads."

Green brews, or *hedge alchemy* as some books referred to it, was a reference to potioneering practices that were as much folk wisdom as sorcery and were of sometimes dubious efficacy. Some bordered on black arts, like potions empowered by animal sacrifice for fertility and powdered human bone in philtres that fixed arthritis, but no reputable wizard would be caught dabbling in those. No where anyone might be looking, anyway. Most were harmless, besides, and folk wisdom had sometimes become accepted as such for good reason: there were a lot of useful tricks to be learned from old tales.

"It was healing call," Roland said, shaking his head. "Though I don't know for what. Father went into the laboratory as well, but not long enough for him to have cast anything."

"It'll be in their records, then," Olivier mused. "I'll have to take a look."

His parents were very methodical about marking down all they sold and to whom, Mother in particular. She was a better brewer than spellcaster, and she liked to follow up on the health of those who'd drunk of her potions – especially if she was using a different version from the usual recipes.

"The lab's lock is magic," Roland reminded him. "You'll need me."

Olivier turned to look at the door and the muted shouting still going on behind it. As good an opportunity as they were going to get, he supposed.

"Let's go," he agreed, and his brother's brilliant smile almost made the whole mess worth it.

—

They snuck into the laboratory with, in all honesty, more caution than was strictly needed. Of their parents where was no sign, though Olivier made haste in finding the bookkeeping tallies anyway. No need to take risks when his little brother was with him, not if he could avoid them. He did not need to look for answers long – three entries from the last was a name that had the young man wincing. Master Nicholas, who'd been given a potion to see to the sickness that'd taken hold in his leg for a full

silver. Double what the brew was actually worth, and maybe a third over what his parent would usually charge for it. Roland looked over his shoulder, and after glancing at his face the younger boy's eyes narrowed.

"The name means something to you," Roland stated.

"It does," Olivier agreed, "but let's get out of here before we speak of it."

They scurried out and headed towards a small thicket outside the house where they could speak in privacy and feign boredom games if their parents came. Roland was visibly impatient, not used to either the excitement or having to wait for answers.

"Master Nicholas and his kin handle the gardens for the House of Light, as well as the vegetable fields that feed Sister Maude and her lay guests," Olivier said.

"So why did he come to us for healing?" Roland frowned. "A priest could do the brew's work without issue."

"Because he's in a dispute with Sister Maude over wages," Olivier said, fully brought into the know by the occasional dinners he still had with Master Laurent's family. "Some of the flower garden work was done by the two lay sisters for leisure so Sister Maude wants to pay less than the full wage, and there was some sort of argument over the vegetables as well."

A petty enough argument: Sister Maude had taken vegetables from the fields early, going against the arrangement of allowing Master Nicholas first pick as part of his payment, but done so taking vegetables the man never chose and not the prettiest of their kind either. The man now refused to work at all, and in retaliation Sister Maude was refusing him healing. Mayoress Suzanne, who'd been the one to speak of the bickering at dinner over a good bottle of wine, had done so while obviously considering the whole affair an amusing anecdote. Bruised pride, nothing to be worried of. Olivier now saw differently.

"We've sold that potion to people before," Roland said.

"Regularly, too. It was one of the first recipes I learned."

"If we sell one to a shepherd who will spend his days in the valleys, it is a trifling thing," Olivier patiently said. "After all, if that same shepherd was in town he would head to the House instead. But Master Nicholas was *refused* healing by Sister Maude. There is a reason he paid higher than the usual price."

And so the House of Light found itself threatened by the emergence of relief beyond its gates. Otherwise Master Nicholas would have been forced to bend his neck in that dispute, eventually, and then after being assuaged Sister Maude could have

shown mercy to repair the relationship. But now a family of practitioners had helped someone she was quarrelling with frustrate her: that was not simply a transaction, in the Sister's eyes, it was a *challenge*. One she must answer, or her influence in Beaumaraais would wane.

"She's coming after us because we healed someone," Roland heatedly said. "Because of coin. That is *foul*, Olivier."

"I imagine the power matters more to her than the silver," he replied. "But it's true. I've heard that out west mages cannot heal at all, by decree of law."

He now understood why much more sharply than his previously nebulous grasp of the forces at play. It was rarely a comforting thing to have a glimpsed at the ugly fingers pulling at the strings from behind the curtain, but blindness had a way of costing more than discomfort.

"People won't stand for this," Roland insisted. "We have friends too, and people who owe us favours. There's things Light can't do, they need us for those."

It certainly wouldn't be a popular measure to drive out Olivier's family, which forbidding it to practice wizardry for coin would essentially ensure. Still, in the end the family could move to another town – they'd lose the house and the laboratory, the ties with spring peddlers and the gathering places for ingredients, but the trade itself could continue elsewhere. It would be the townsfolk of Beaumaraais who'd find a lot less convenience to their lives, especially with Roland being a blooming young enchanter already capable of very useful things. Sister Maude's influence would wane regardless, Olivier considered, because she'd be seen as a petty tyrant who'd robbed the town of useful and respected tradesmen for no good reason. Did she perhaps mean to only use the ban to put fear into his parents, and then lift it before they were forced to leave? It would be a risk, even so.

There was more to this than he understood, Olivier decided, and only one place where he might get answers shedding light over the matter.

"I'll head to the temple," he said. "There is more to this situation than we know."

"And why would she hear you out?" Roland said, skeptical.

It'd not been meant to be hurtful, Olivier reminded himself, the way he'd phrased that. The underlying implication that Olivier wasn't even a mage, so why would his word matter in this?

"I have a letter of commendation from another priest," the young man replied. "She'll hear me out, and when she does I'm sure an agreement can be reached."

"We shouldn't have to agree to anything, Ollie," his little brother insisted. "We're not wrong, *she* is. If she just left us alone-"

"That's not how the world works, Roland," Olivier said, a tad sharply. "You can't solve everything with a spell or getting stubborn about being right. *Everyone* thinks they're right – and if you never try to see it the way others do, you're going to end up fighting all of them."

His little brother's cheeks reddened in anger and he looked away, mulish.

"I didn't mean to raise my voice," Olivier said, feeling his stomach sour. "I'm sorry, Roland. But this needs to be fixed and getting angry won't do that."

"I know," Roland quietly said. "But you do know it, don't you? That they're *wrong* about this."

"I do," the young man agreed, clasping his brother's shoulder, "but we can still try to turn it into a right."

—

When Olivier arrived with Brother Albert's letter of commendation in hand, it was to the mild awkwardness of being received by one of the very men in House livery who'd come to visit his family home as an unspoken threat. Taking a closer look at the man in question, he noted some faint scars – blademarks, if he was not mistaken – and what the son of an alchemist skilled in healing recognize as a broken nose that'd been healed well enough it was barely noticeable. Between that and the ramrod straight stance, the man screamed *soldier* to him. Not exactly your average lay brother. Without introducing himself, the scarred man disappeared into the house with the letter – not asking permission to take it, either – and returned only some time later.

"You are invited to have a cup of wine in the gardens," the man told him.

"How civilized," Olivier drily said. "My letter, please?"

He received it and felt the man's eyes on his back as he took the side path and passed through the field of flowers and flowering bushes that surrounded the cloister. He'd not asked where it was to be received, but the answer presented itself before long: between a few beautiful magnolia trees, a small wooden table and two seats awaited. A young woman in austere lay sister's robes

stood behind it, a hand folded her back, ready to serve the wine for guests. There was no sign of Sister Maude, though making the likes of Olivier wait would hardly be unusual for a woman of her stature. The young man made his way there, eyes straying when he noticed that the lay sister – this would be the young one, not the aged – was really quite striking. Grey eyes, long and braided blonde hair: she seemed of age with him, or perhaps slightly older, and by looks half a princess out of story.

"Sister Maude invites you to sit," the young woman smiled as he approached. "She is seeing to House duties but will be along shortly."

"I come and go at her leisure," Olivier replied. "We journey as the Heavens will."

The blonde lay sister hesitated for a moment, then recalled the answer.

"And ever head towards their grace," she firmly replied.

Not a lay sister meaning to take vows, then, Olivier decided. She'd been in the cloister for at least a year and she was still so unsure when giving the Traveller's Blessing? No, this one was not wanting to trade sister's robes for a Sister's.

"It would be hopelessly impolite of me to sit while you stand," he said. "Will you not take a seat as well?"

"That is very kind of you," she replied, "but it would be improper for one of my station."

If you're not from a good family, I'll swallow whole a stone, Olivier thought. Etiquette wasn't something nobodies knew, it was the little rules the powerful had made so they could tell each other apart from the rest.

"The easy solution is for me to stand as well, then," he lightly replied. "It is a beautiful day to enjoy a garden, anyhow."

Grey eyes studied him and the hint of a smile emerged.

"How obstinately gallant," she said. "I am Alisanne, a lay sister to this temple."

"Olivier de Beaumaraais," he replied. "I dabble in this and that."

"What brings you to this House, Olivier?" she smiled.

It was a pretty smile, he thought, which made it dangerous. Young men did a lot of foolish things to make pretty girls smile.

"I hope to resolve a misunderstanding," Olivier said.

"A diplomatic way to speak of strife," Alisanne replied.

"Strife," he said, meeting her eyes, "is what happens when reason has lost. So I speak of a misunderstanding, because I do not believe any involved in it to be unreasonable."

"A bold statement," the grey-eyed woman replied.

There was a flicker of something like interest in that gaze, and it had him restless. Pleased and irked all that once.

"I lack for much," Olivier de Beaumaraais said, "but never that."

Whatever else might have been said was not to be, for Sister Maude emerged from the garden path. The older woman's bearing was calm, her gait measured, but Olivier saw unease under the surface. That spoke to discomfort about her decision, he decided, since *he* hardly warranted anything of the sort.

"Young Olivier," Sister Maude smiled. "It is a blessing to see you, even in these tense times."

"Sister," Olivier replied, bowing. "It is a blessing to be received in any time."

He made the bow exactly as low as *Manners of the High and Noble* indicated he should when speaking to the head of a temple.

"What a mannerly young man," the older woman said, tone warming. "Please, do be seated."

He waited until she'd claimed her seat before doing the same. Alisanne poured with grace, first allowing Sister Maude to sniff and taste the vintage to see if it suited and only pouring full cups when the older woman nodded her assent. Courtesies were exchanged over small sips, slivers of politeness that meant little in and of themselves but stood as an expression of goodwill. Of respect. It was a gesture one did not bother offer when there was no common ground to be found, so it was promising to have gone through it at all.

"I was surprised, my son, to hear of your visit," Sister Maude eventually said. "I had thought that after the regrettable events of the day your hours might be otherwise occupied."

"My family is still reeling for the surprise," Olivier amiably agreed. "But it is not my place to intervene in the conversations of my parents, and so I am left with free hands."

"It is a shame," Sister Maude mused as she eyed her glass, "that you do not have such a place. You have grown into a sensible young man, Olivier, and even as a child you were of virtuous leaning."

The sole without the Talent in a family of the talented, she meant, and she'd spoken like there could be no doubt that having magic was some sort of a *taint*. Perhaps not a sin, no, but the mark of a propensity to sin at least. He could understand why his brother's teeth had clenched with anger, when he'd caught scent of the sentiment lying under all of this, but the anger did not burn in him. Olivier had been outside too long for that.

"You flatter me," the young man said. "I have ever been too concerned with earthly matters, in truth, and it is they who bring me here. I come here so approach you on behalf of my kin, Sister."

The stout woman's face cooled.

"It is a pious thing for a son to seek absolution for his parents," Sister Maude said. "Yet such matters are between the sinner and the Heavens, not for us to intercede in."

He'd lose her, Olivier thought, if he came here asking for forgiveness. Even if he offered reparations, bribes like Father had been mulling over. This wasn't about coin, it was about power. If they'd been at odds with a merchant, whose power flowed from gold and goods, those might have been an answer. But the House of Light's strength did not come coin, it came from authority – an authority his parents had threatened. Yet Olivier had been wondering at the sudden and radical decision, the ultimatum thrown in the face of his family without warning or even attempt at negotiations. This would not be without consequences for Sister Maude, so why was she doing it? The answer, Olivier now grasped, was standing besides the table after having poured them wine. The lay sister Alisanne had not been dismissed, as someone in her position usually would have been past the initial courtesies being exchanged.

The beautiful girl was related to someone important, Olivier suspected, and Sister Maude saw her presence here as a way to escape the priestess' exile into stewardship of a nowhere temple in the Valleys. It made sense, now. The old lay sister was likely a tutor or guardian of some sort, while the three lay brothers with soldiers' scars were household guards. It even explained why the highborn Captain Alain, who'd led the riders from Apenun who came to clear out the bandits over summer, had visited the House so often when he was hardly the pious sort. He'd been courting the favour of a highborn girl who'd been sent here as a lay sister for some reason. Alisanne was likely from Apenun herself, then, he mused. And she could not be of middling birth, if an older nobleman with a military command had been courting her goodwill.

Of course, Sister Maude would only see her fortunes change if Alisanne spoke favourably of her host when she returned home, which made the lingering troubles with Master Nicholas a much

grander affair than any had suspected. Was the Sister trying to gain esteem by acting decisively, showing authority and prestige to impress her highborn guest? It was a graceless way to play the game, but it was true she had little choice now that she had been so cornered by the situation. She could not let a family of petty wizards thwart her, or she'd pass for the fool of that story. The source of this conflict, Olivier considered, was a struggle of power: the House and his family were seen as rivals, each wielding influence in competition. The deeper layer was that Sister Maude needed to achieve *something* by this crisis, or her hopes of escape would be dashed.

Good, he thought with a smile. This could still be salvaged.

"Ah, I am afraid my careless words led to a misunderstanding," Olivier said, dipping his head in contrition. "I come not seeking such an intervention but instead bearing an offer of partnership with the House, Sister Maude."

The utter surprise on the woman's face gave him the leave to continued speaking.

"As you might know, my brother has begun to enchant and my trading has seen me accumulate some coin," Olivier said. "Our family intends to open a shop in town that will serve as an apothecary and a provider of such enchanted tools."

A lie, the last part, but a plausible one. He could feel Alisanne's eyes on him but he had no attention to spare for that heady gaze.

"Are quite certain," Sister Maude delicately said, "that now is the proper time for such a venture?"

"You cut to the heart of the matter," Olivier smiled. "Indeed, I am afraid that such open sorceries where faithful townsfolk like those of Beaumaraais live might lead to unwarranted fears. Which is why I would humbly petition that the shop would be opened in partnership with the House, and naturally under its supervision."

There could be no conflict between the power of the House and his family's if they were one and the same. That meant taking the subordinate's position, and paying for that privilege to boot, but that would also mean that anyone troubling the shop would also be antagonizing the House of Light. No more humiliating than paying taxes to the prince so his soldiers would clear out bandits, if looked at a certain way. *And when Alisanne goes home, it will be with the tale of how the clever Sister Maude made her wizard foes submit and gained revenue for her temple without lifting a finger.* Everyone conceded but everyone won. That, and he saw a longer game on the horizon. One that might finally let him reconcile his blood and his calling. The priestess considered him for a moment, over the rim of her cup.

"And how," Sister Maude finally said, "would such an arrangement be made formal?"

Just like that, all that was left was the haggling.

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Neither Father nor Mother appreciated his 'meddling', they made very clear, not that it mattered after Roland came out and sided with him. Neither of them could enchant, and both knew it was only a matter of time until he could match Father in raw strength. If they antagonized their younger son, he could simply turn to the older for the coin to start his own shop. In the end their choice was between a slugging match with the House of Light or letting Olivier have his way, and while both cost pride one would cost them a lot more than that as well. Hardly blind to the resentment he'd earned by forcing their hand, Olivier found himself belatedly grateful for one of the conditions Sister Maude had pushed: namely, that he himself was to be the owner of the shop along with the House instead of any other of his family.

The priestess had phrased it as recognition of his entrepreneurial spirit and the silver he'd be sinking into the shop, but they both knew it was because this way she could avoid being in business with practitioners directly. Regardless it was Olivier's name that was signed onto the formal contract Master Laurent drafted, as *Master Olivier of Beaumaraais*, and it meant that there was no lawful way to displace him from the arrangement. Sister Maude herself would not involve herself into something as mercantile as running a shop directly – it would be frowned upon by her fellows – but she sent a representative to speak for the House of Light and help around the shop.

Olivier was not particularly surprised when grey-eyed Alisanne in her neat lay sister robes was the one who was 'assigned' to the duty.

Regardless of his suspicions regarding her the young man found that Alisanne knew her letters and could keep a tight ledger, both of which were godsent as he tried to get everything in place for an opening before winter. She was even willing to help with handiwork when in the right mood, which struck him as unusual for one of her likely birth. Shelves were filled with potions, herbs hung to dry and as Olivier moved into the shop back home Roland put his whole back into learning enchantments. His younger brother had begun to tear through his lessons at impressive speed, to Olivier's mild surprise. Roland was talented and dutiful, but he'd always enjoyed his leisure time. No doubt the girls of the town would miss him, now that he spent all his hours pouring over books or shut in the laboratory. It was only when his little brother coincidentally began to always arrive at the shop to speak with Olivier or bring over herbs when Alisanne was

there that the reason revealed itself. He'd not been the only one to notice, either.

"By his reputation in town, I would not have thought him so hesitant to approach me," the grey-eyed sister told him one evening.

"You *are* quite striking," Olivier absent-mindedly replied, most his attention on the ledger before him.

He only realized what he'd said moment later, and furiously pushed down the blush even as he cursed his loose tongue. He scratched his quill through hellebore, of which he already had seven stalks.

"Am I now?" Alisanne slyly replied, coming to lean against the table.

"And almost transparently highborn," Olivier added, to put her on the backfoot.

The fair-haired woman shrugged.

"I never pretended otherwise," she said.

"Which does have me wonder what you are doing in the likes of Beaumaraais as a lay sister," Olivier said, brow rising.

He'd not expected an answer, but he was pleasantly surprised.

"I was judged to have impolitic opinions and too little will to refrain from speaking them," Alisanne said. "My mother thought a religious retreat in the mountains would help me learn... temperance, and my father was disinclined to fight her over the matter."

"You're from Apenun, I believe?" he said.

"How relentless you are in your questioning," she sighed. "I much preferred the blushing flattery."

"I've a curious nature," Olivier admitted.

"So do I," Alisanne said. "And worse, I am easily prone to boredom."

She offered him a smile, then, that he suspected he would much dislike see offered to another.

"You have yet to disappoint in that regard," she told him.

"I will," Olivier frankly told her. "My wanderings are seasonal, and I've only so many stories of old ones to tell. Besides, this shop will keep me more tethered to Beaumaraais than I was before."

"How easily you dismiss the possibility that *you* might be the most interesting part of you, Olivier," Alisanne replied, amused. "On our very first meeting, I witnessed a country boy ruthlessly read and manipulate a woman trained in the halls of power of the House of Light so that she might serve his interests. Do you believe such a thing is frequent?"

"I simply found a compromise that benefitted everyone," he said.

"It is the most genteel and noble manner of mastery," Alisanne said, sounding as if she was quoting someone, "that which benefits both the master and the mastered."

"I am the master of nothing," Olivier said, rolling his eyes. "And the sum of my coming ambitions is becoming a passable shopkeeper."

"I don't believe that for a moment," the grey-eyed woman said, leaning in as she considered him with serious eyes.

She was close, he saw, and a strand of hair had slipped her bun to slide along her cheek. The urge was there to tuck it away, though Olivier knew that if his hand went to her cheek he'd not be able to stop himself from kissing her. It was difficult to think, the air around him seemingly thick and his skin tingling. He forced himself to anyway.

"Yet I'd be a poor shopkeep indeed, if I traded something for nothing," Olivier said.

"Why, Master Olivier," she said, "what manner of a deal might you be trying to offer this poor lay sister?"

He almost choked when he realized exactly what that coy smile was implying, even though he knew she was teasing.

"Your full name," he said. "I'll tell you, in exchange for your full name."

"There is more to me than that," Alisanne said, tone cooling.

Part of him wanted to bend like a reed in the wind at the hint of her displeasure, but he pushed it down. If she wanted to learn his secrets she would have to share hers.

"I share only stranger's faith with strangers," Olivier said. "For even the most splendid tree has roots."

The fair-haired woman's brow rose.

"Sherehazad the Seer?" she asked, sounding impressed.

"The quote was somewhat butchered," he said, "but the sentiment stands."

Father had bought the book believing it to be full of Wasteland spells, as it was Praesi, only to find after translation from Lower Miezan that it was repository of eastern poetry. Alisanne slowly nodded.

"It is somewhat clumsy to compare a woman to a tree, even by foreign verse," she said sounding amused. "But we have a bargain."

She offered her hand and he took it – using surprise and the grip she jerked him closer. Lips against his ear, she whispered.

"Alisanne Lassier."

Lassier? Where had he heard that name before? Olivier withdrew an inch, looking into her eyes with an unspoken question, and she chuckled. Whatever ill mood had first taken her at his words it had clearly since faded.

"My mother rules Apenun," Alisanne told him. "My uncle is the commander of Prince Arsene's personal guard."

"Ah," Olivier murmured.

She was of higher birth than he'd suspected, and he'd suspected fairly high.

"And you?" she said. "What is it that you are plotting in the guise of a shop, Olivier?"

He bit his lips.

"I am not certain it will work," he cautioned.

She was unmoved, and visibly, so he continued.

"This shop is not a shop," he murmured. "It is haven for those with the Talent, its safety guaranteed by the House of Light itself. I have legal right to hire workers as I see fit."

Alisanne's eyes brightened.

"You think more will come," she said.

"When word spreads," Olivier quietly agreed. "And I intend to help it along."

"I was right," Alisanne said, smiling that smile. "Not boring at all."

It would be trouble, Olivier knew. But he'd never been good at staying out trouble, and so he found himself kissing Alisanne Lassier quite ardently as the ledgers were left to gather dust.

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If he was to be lucky, he'd thought, one wizard might risk the paths and come to Beaumaraïs during winter. Instead there were four practitioners before the first snows fell, and one more came before the ice took.

Trouble, Olivier de Beaumaraïs thought.

Charlatan III

"Beware of they who speak of doing good without speaking of those whose good they seek."

— Theodore Langman, Wizard of the West

The townsfolk of Beaumaraïs were not particularly superstitious or zealous, but when the number of practitioners in town more than doubled over a season's span it was only to be expected that there would be unease.

Olivier tried to think of it in the same terms as if the number of people carrying swords had swelled by the same amount, but he knew there were differences. An unscrupulous mage could do a lot more damage with a little black knowledge than a rapacious fantassin could do with a sword and heartlessness. But unease was not outright fear, and it'd remain that way so long as the House of Light kept supporting this arrangement through Sister Maude. It was only a matter, then, of soothing away apprehensions and making clear that all these 'wizardly vagrants' — as he'd heard Old Gontrand call them quite loudly in the streets — were useful to the town. Thankfully Olivier had been raised among practitioners and spent most his life since trying to make coin out of thin air, so when it came to acquiring usefulness he had ideas aplenty.

The first two who'd come, a certain Master Maurice and his young daughter Segoline, had been the easiest of all. They were peddlers by trade, openly offering Maurice's services as a smith in small towns without one but more discreetly offering some healing and enchanting in towns that seemed to have a tolerance for magic. The man was a widower who wanted a place to raise his daughter in peace, and as soon as the town smith Mistress Caroline was reassured that none of her business would be taken from her all opposition melted away. Olivier's private suggestion of a partnership with Master Maurice, enchanting some of her products for a fee so that *she* might sell artefacts herself, had caught her interest. The town smith even began throwing her weight around in favour of the 'guests'.

It was the arrival of the one who introduced himself Maxime Redflame, a middle-aged and grizzled man who claimed to have served in several fantassin companies as a war wizard, that began

to complicate things. Much as lords and princes might prize those whose Talent could be turned to violence, Olivier had no real use for them. It did not help that he liked his drink and got rowdy when drunk. Alisanne, who'd never heard of half the companies who'd supposedly employed him, suggested the drinking was why he'd sought refuge out here in the mountains. Drinking could be forgiven in a simple soldier, but in a mage it was another thing: no one wanted a drunk throwing around fireballs. The man was put to work gathering herbs out in the mountains, for he was handy with a knife, and made to learn enough to improve his rather mediocre brewing.

Maxime Redflame resented the work and took no pains to hide it, but he was in no position to bargain.

Just before the snows the fourth practitioner arrived in town, in almost every way unlike the last. Morgaine was her name, and she was both young and comely – not even twenty-five, and though obviously a wanderer she was well-dressed and of some means. She claimed to come from the Principality of Orne, to the south, though she was a traveller who'd spent some time in the Free Cities and the Thalassocracy. Morgaine was well-read and genteel in ways that sometimes made Olivier uncomfortable, for his own worldliness had never ventured much farther than these mountains. Though she remained vague on the depths of her leaning in matters magical, she proved a very fine healer as well as capable of predicting the weather to some degree. The latter did much to endear her to the town, as it the snows had come early that year and might have caught the townsfolk by surprise otherwise. Morgaine was charming and well-spoken, and so for all the power that she was known to wield she quickly became a darling of the town.

It was a young man called Ludovic that proved to be the greatest trouble of all, though in a fit of irony. Ludovic himself was shy and gentle, with all the temperament of a mouse, and was half-dead of cold when he stumbled into Beaumarais after having taken the mountain paths before the ice could take enough to make them unusable. He knew no magic, though it was undeniable he had the Talent, and had been almost abjectly grateful for being given a bed and a hot meal. Ludovic, as it happened, came from the town of Grisemanche. A little under two weeks away by wagon, when the paths were clear and dry. He'd run away from home after losing control of his Talent and rendering his mother mute, hoping that the rumoured 'home for wizards' in Beaumarais would take him in. It was unlikely that Ludovic's family would be coming after him anytime soon, not with winter making such a trip so arduous, but with spring that would change.

Olivier saw to it that the younger boy was given a cot in the back of the shop until proper accommodations could be found for him, and reluctantly he asked for Morgaine's help in ensuring

that the weeks travelling in the cold with little food or rest would not leave marks. He gave them privacy during the examination, and when the slim dark-eyed woman emerged from the backroom it was with a look of tightly controlled displeasure on her face.

"Ill news?" Olivier asked.

"The frostbite was mild, and though he has thinned it is nothing that regular meals will not be able to fix," Morgaine said. "It was also the least of his troubles. Most of the bruises on him are older than his travels and some of his bones were broken several times."

The young man breathed out sharply. It was not unheard of, this. While it was against the teachings of the Heavens to mistreat a child, magic made things different in the eyes of some people.

"Understood," Olivier simply said.

Morgaine fixed him with a steady look, a strand of her crow-black hair having come loose from her elegant hairdo.

"And what do you intend to do about this?" she asked.

"Settle affairs with his family when the snows melt," he replied. "So long as the curse of muteness is lifted and reparations made, his kin should be willing to surrender their claim to him."

"That boy was beaten," Morgaine said. "Often and cruelly. And you speak of *reparations*?"

"I speak of removing him from that peril," Olivier calmly replied. "I am not a lord or a magistrate, to be able to take it further than that."

"There are other ways to discourage that sort," Morgaine said. "Some are discreet. It would not be so difficult to arrange for persistent nightmares or move a few sprites to mischief."

"And when his kin go to the mayor and the House of Light to complain of being harassed by mages intervening in their family's affairs," the young man flatly replied, "which they very well might even if we do nothing, mind you, but if they do and we *have* harassed them – what will we do, when hard-eyed men in House livery come sniffing around and we truly have something to hide?"

"Is your deal with Sister Maude not meant to shield us from that very scrutiny?" Morgaine said.

"She is a single sister in a backwater town," Olivier replied. "This arrangement has been allowed to continue because for some it represents an opportunity. If it ever becomes a threat, even a written contract will weigh no more than smoke."

"I had believed you bolder than this, from the stories told in this town," the dark-eyed mage said.

"I had believed you wiser than this, from all the stories you've told of your travels," Olivier flatly replied.

It ended with that, the two of them parting ways with courteous words but also a distinct chill. He sensed he had disappointed Morgaine in some way, but then she had also disappointed him. He spoke of it with Alisanne, the following evening when they spent time together, and she was unsurprised.

"She believed you to be ambitious in a different way than you are," she told him.

"I'm not ambitious in the slightest," Olivier said.

Alisanne's grey eyes were rich with the laughter at his expense she was too well-bred to indulge in.

"Indeed?" she said.

"I've some notions of what the future might look like," Olivier allowed.

"You've proved a fair hand at soothing the fears of the townsfolk," Alisanne said. "That aside with the smith might even have worked better than you think."

His brow rose.

"How so?"

"I have it on good authority that our own Master Maurice has been going on long walks with Mistress Caroline," she said. "A widower and a widow, brought together by the... heat of the forge. How passionate, no?"

She was teasing, as she often did, but months of increasingly ardent embraces away from prying eyes had taught him to tease back.

"I know no passion, save the taste of her lips," he quoted in answer. "Is it not a folly, how my heart skips?"

Her cheeks pinked, as he'd thought they might. The following poem by Genevieve the Rossignol grew rather more risqué than the first two lines might lead one to believe.

"It is a good thing that you are not as handsome as your brother," Alisanne decided. "Such a man would be entirely too dangerous to my gender."

It was difficult to feel insulted by that when she followed up by catching the back of his neck and dragging him close for some very enthusiastic kissing. It was late, and there were only the two of them in the shop, so when clothes began to drop the ground – first his shirt and then her robes, until neither of them wore much of anything at all – Olivier said nothing. It was only when they were to be entirely bare, and what they both knew would follow, that he forced himself to speak.

“Are you certain?” he asked, though he might just go mad if she said no.

“Gods yes,” Alisanne hissed.

The visible desire in her eyes only fed into his own arousal. There were no more objection from him after that, and hardly any words at all until they were well and spent. The two of them ended up holding each other on the rug of the store’s backroom, enjoying the warmth of the other’s body.

“What kind of ambition did you mean?” Olivier asked. “Earlier, I mean, when were talking about Morgaine.”

“You want to talk of another woman *now*?” Alisanne said, sounding mightily amused.

“I could withdraw my question until tomorrow, if you’d prefer,” he drily said.

She dragged him closer, silenced him with a kiss, and he took it as the end of the conversation. It wasn’t, however.

“You’ve the services of several wizards, some coin and ties with the House,” Alisanne sleepily said. “I hear tell you’ve even been seen seducing highborn ladies of late.”

“Lies,” Olivier amiably said, “I assure you it was entirely the other way around.”

His shoulder was swatted in half-hearted admonishment.

“She expected you to make yourself into a sort of lord, using the mages as your enforcers,” Alisanne said. “Now, since you’ve had the indecency of forcing me to think you’ll have to fetch a blanket as atonement. I’d rather enjoy you for a little while still than return to the temple.”

Disinclined to argue with that, Olivier extracted himself from their embrace and rose to his feet. His heart skipped when he noticed the door to the front of the shop had been slightly cracked open this entire time, a damning testament to how... distracted they had both been. No one had come in, however, so

after closing it shut and grabbing the blanket he'd been sent questing after he put the whole matter out of his mind.

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It was not a long winter that followed but it still felt too short to Olivier.

He'd not wasted the time, instead cementing the usefulness of the shop in the eyes of the town by arranging for the mages to create enchanted stones capable of radiating heat as well as light when firewood began to run low in some homes – freely given out, though with a signed promise of payment when the season turned and coin was had again. Roland and Morgaine had proved to be a remarkably gifted team when working together, and though the other practitioners had not helped much the successes of those two had reflected on all of them. Yet when spring came there would be changes. There would be fewer quiet evenings where he and Alisanne could lose themselves in each other, for one, but there was also a hanging sword above their head: Ludovic's kin would come for him, sure as dawn, when the ice thawed. Roland's visits had also grown rarer, as he dove into his studies with both their parents and accepted Morgaine's own gracious offer of sharing some of knowledge. Olivier took to visiting him regularly instead.

It was one night on the eve of spring that he found his younger brother in his rooms at the family house, reading through Mother's eastern poetry book, and to his surprise Roland eyed him with thinly-veiled antipathy.

"Ollie, is it true that you and Alisanne are lovers?" Roland said, closing the book and hastily putting it away.

Olivier's brow rose. He'd believed the two of them to be discreet, or at least as discreet as one could be in a small town. He did not consider lying, though it would have been simpler.

"Yes," he admitted. "Though that is best kept secret."

Though no rule of the House forbade dalliances, a lay sister would be expected not to dabble in them if she'd been sent to a temple to learn temperance in the first place. It'd reflect poorly on both their reputations if it became common knowledge they were involved.

"You know that I am fond of her," Roland accused.

"So am I," Olivier frankly said. "And you barely know her. I am sorry that this pains you, but you've no real call to be bruised over the matter."

His little brother's face reddened. Though he was not exactly spoiled it could not be denied that Roland was used to getting his way, especially if he put in the effort. It sometimes brought out ugly things in him.

"It will not last forever," Olivier sighed. "So put it out of your mind. She will bore of the town and leave eventually, Roland. She's too clever to stay in a place like this forever."

"She might," Roland denied. "She is the youngest of seven, she has little to inherit."

The young man's brow rose as he considered his brother. He'd known that Alisanne had siblings – she'd mentioned two in passing – but he'd not known how many, which made it more than passing odd that Roland *did*.

"How do you know that?" Olivier asked.

His brother looked aside.

"Roland," he sharply said.

"I asked, that's all," Roland angrily said. "Let it go, Olivier. It's none of your business."

He swallowed the angry reply on the tip of his tongue and nodded. Perhaps it wasn't.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then," Olivier stiffly said.

His little brother grimaced, looking guilty.

"I'm sorry," Roland said, then hesitated. "Do you mean it, though? That the two of you won't last?"

"I cannot see how it would," Olivier admitted.

He would miss her sorely when she left, and be morose for a long time, but he would not delude himself into thinking that their affair would keep her from leaving this backwater when the opportunity to return home to Apenun beckoned.

"Then it's nothing," Roland firmly said. "Just bruising, you're right."

Olivier left, both heartened by the almost cordial way the conversation had ended and oddly troubled. Yet there was no time to delve into his unease, because within days spring had come and fresh troubles with it.

Jacques and Annette of Grisemanche were, Olivier grasped within an hour of first having met them, in their own way some of the vilest people he'd ever met.

Ludovic's parents had not gone to the shop, when they'd arrived to Beaumaraais, but instead straight to the House of Light. Alisanne had slipped out while they spoke with Sister Maude, bringing with her bad news. Ludovic's wild spell that'd rendered Annette Grisemanche mute had faded over the winter, as untaught magic often did, and the attentions of a priest capable of wielding Light had been enough to chase away the lingering wooden tongue that'd been the last remnant of the curse. There would be no leverage or goodwill to be had by removing it. Olivier sent the youngest mage in his charge away from the village, out with Maxime Redflame to camp in the mountains and harvest herbs for a few days, then prepared for what would no doubt be an unpleasant few days.

That very evening he was invited to have a cup of wine with the two strangers and Sister Maude, so that the priestess might host them and help 'resolve the dispute'. Given the half-faded bruises on their son's body he'd half expected the couple to have horns and burning eyes, but instead they turned out to be rather personable. Neither good-looking nor ugly, they dressed modestly and spoke courteously. They were in good odour with Sister Maude's equivalent in Grisemanche, Sister Lucie, and considered to be respectable by their community. Their children had all found trades, and they donated regularly to their temple.

"Ludovic was always troubled," Annette of Grisemanche sadly said. "We never suspected it might be something as serious as magic, Sister, but perhaps we should have."

"The signs were there," Jacques of Grisemanche agreed. "We were blinded by familiar love, I fear. To think he would attack his own mother!"

"Troubling indeed," Sister Maude said, turning a steady gaze towards Olivier.

He'd waited patiently for them to cease talking, remembering the look on Morgaine's face that night. The one when she'd emerged from a room where she'd seen repeatedly broken bones in a boy barely twelve. He understood her anger a little better now, he thought. It was a dead end, such things always were, but then it was easier to be calm when it was not you the blows were raining on.

"Blinded is perhaps the right word," Olivier said, smiling pleasantly. "For I cannot imagine how else you might have missed the many bruises on his body, or the oft-broken bones."

There was a moment of silence.

"That is a heavy accusation," Jacques of Grisemanche harshly said.

He was not a big man, but he was larger than Olivier – who was not done growing but would not be tall even when he had. The older man leaned forward, as if to loom, but the younger one had been faced with bare steel before. Posturing seemed like a trifling thing, after having seen your own death reflected in a blade.

"It was a simple statement," Olivier calmly replied. "I wonder why it is you might feel accused, Master Jacques."

"Any parent would feel this way, when told they missed the injuries of their child," Annette of Grisemanche said. "Emotions are simply running high, Master Olivier. No doubt Ludovic simply hid them from us with his magic, ashamed of his truck with evil spirits."

Olivier did not doubt for a moment there'd been evil in that child's life, as it happened. How could he, when at this very moment it was looking at him with measuring eyes?

"A short recess is in order," Sister Maude said. "It will allow for the heat of the moment to pass."

Her gaze on him was no longer quite so demanding, but she was still handling the couple carefully. Olivier frowned. Why? She had to know that allowing them some time to speak alone would let them agree on some sort of story explaining away the evidence of beatings. The two strangers left for a short walk through the garden, even as Sister Maude broke with etiquette and filled Olivier's cup anew herself.

"This is a problem, Olivier," the priestess said. "You are poking at more than you can afford to provoke."

Why would she think that? Gods, why would a woman of even middling faith allow a beaten child who'd suffered not just bruises but broken bones to return to – *oh*, he thought, blood going cold. The bones. They'd been broken several times, yet never healed wrong as such a break badly set or healed often by magic would. Ludovic used his arms and hands without trouble, after all. There was only one person in Grisemanche that would be able to heal the boy like that. *And since it happened several times, even a fool would have been able to figure out why*, Olivier realized. The couple, he'd been told earlier, was seen as respectable.

They even donated regularly to the temple in Grisemanche.

"I do not wear a red cross on my clothes," Olivier said. "I do not crusade the cleanse the world from all evils. But I will not return that boy to beatings, Sister Maude."

"I have not asked you to," the priestess stiffly replied. "Yet I warn you now that if Sister Lucie requests an inquiry by the House in Apenun, then all that was built here will vanish into thin air."

So he would have to grease the palms of the hollow things in human flesh that'd sat across him, and perhaps even the crooked sister as well. Else a fuss would be kicked up, before the shop and what it represented was ready to withstand the attention, and the consequences would be on his head.

"I understand," Olivier de Beaumaraais said, tone forcefully even.

"I knew you would," Sister Maude said. "Patience is a virtue, Olivier. All accounts are settled in due time."

He did not answer, the anger too sharp and close to his tongue. When the couple returned he began to negotiate in indirect, meandering pretty words how much it might cost to buy their son. They wanted to continue taking a cut of his salary and the profit of his works, the parasites, but he managed to present that as taking from the revenues of the House of Light so they hastily withdrew. In the end it came down to thirteen silvers and three promised artefacts of a nature yet to be determined, the quality of which would be attested by Sister Maude. It was steep cost, but Olivier at least finagled them into having to settle any doubts by their *friend* Sister Lucie themselves. May they all choke squabbling over what their shares of the bribes should be.

He left the temple feeling exhausted and feeling dirtied, so it was not a pleasant surprise for him to find Morgaine waiting at the shop. Lounging behind the counter, the beautiful sorceress did not take the initiative to greet him and only studied him with dark and knowing eyes.

"Morgaine," he greeted her. "Can this wait until tomorrow? I find myself in no state to converse."

"There is a spell from the east that allows one to see what is far away, within certain rules," Morgaine said. "Mine is a paltry enough imitation, but it still allows me sight within the temple."

Olivier's irritation mounted. Not only was she admitting to having spied on him, she was stubbornly refusing to take the hint that he was in no mood for this.

"Should you be caught indulging in that, it is not you alone that will suffer the consequences of it," he sharply said.

The dark-eyed woman smiled.

"Does it unsettle you, the lack of control?" she asked. "The realization that your authority exists only so long as we allow it to?"

That have him pause. His eyes narrowed.

"You are beginning," Olivier calmly said, "to speak unwisely."

"Ah, and we *must* be wise," Morgaine mocked. "Always. Else we are wicked, and so we'll be clapped in irons and ran out and butchered and *burned*. But you fine folk, well, that is different. Even if you beat us and break our bones we are to smile, and if we're lucky we can pay you for the privilege of leaving us alone. Eventually, that is. After you tire of the cruelty."

The longer she spoke the more the anger dripped into her voice openly. Her hands clenched over the counter as her expression hardened and sorcery flickered around her fingers in thread of red light. Olivier had never really thought of magic as something that could be turned against him, that could be used to *hurt* him, but in that moment he realized that if she struck at him with a spell he would most likely die. She'd not survive the night, for he'd die loudly and draw attention, but simply because of her magic and anger she had power over him. And he was but a young fool in the middle of nowhere, he knew. How galling it must be for an officer in expensive armour to feel like this, or a highborn magistrate. And so Olivier understood just a little bit, now, why people feared mages. Why they wanted them gone. It was a shameful thing, but he understood the fear at last.

And yet for all of Lady Morgaine's anger it seemed to him that her eyes stayed calm. Calculating. But it must be a mistake, he thought, for there was nothing calculated about this confrontation. It felt too raw for that.

"You ask me to change the writ of things," Olivier said. "I cannot, Morgaine. It is unfair, and it should not be this way, but it is not in my power to mend. All I can do is what I am doing."

The sorceress looked tired, suddenly.

"You are not as those two jackals are," she said. "But this... stray dog refuge you are trying to make for us, it is not an answer. You are trying to protect us like we're children, to chase away those who'd harm us while we hide in the mountains until you have settled our affairs for us. It is no way to live. You make decisions in our name without truly understanding our troubles, because they have never been *your* troubles. It is a well-meaning condescension you offer but condescension nonetheless."

It wounded this pride, that this stranger would come and complain of what he had built with little help from anyone at all. He was not an angel, to be able to solve all troubles with a snap of his fingers, and she was not forced to be here. If there were better offers to entertain, then let her take one of them. Yet that was anger and pride. It was resentment, a many-headed snake that Olivier knew still dwelled in him for all that years ago he had decided to take the other road. One decision, though, did not choose the cast of an entire life. He would have made that same choice again, as many times as it took. So he breathed out, and forced himself to calm.

"You have qualms, evidently," Olivier said. "Express them properly so that they might be addressed."

"You have made yourself into the lord of this little town's wizards," Morgaine said. "With good reasons and intentions, but you have made yourself a lord still. We are beholden to you, you settle our troubles for us and we ply our magic on your behalf."

She expected you to make yourself into a sort of lord, using the mages as your enforcers, Alisanne had said. Instead Morgaine thought him to have made himself lord of only the mages, and this it seemed she could not suffer.

"Is this your own belief," Olivier asked, "or that of all mages of Beaumaraais?"

"The sentiment is shared by many," Morgaine said. "Ask, if you do not believe me, though I imagine some will be afraid of being tossed out if they truly speak their mind."

He would not take her word for this – she'd done nothing to earn that sort of trust from him – but neither would he dismiss what she'd said outright. That would be dangerously complacent.

"The nature of the arrangement that brought you to Beaumaraais is not something I can change," Olivier frankly said.

"No," Morgaine softly said. "I imagine not. But for all that it is your name on the parchment, it need not remain so."

His brow rose. That he might sign over the shop to her was a suggestion both foolish – the House would not accept it – and personally ruinous. He'd invested most of his coin into the venture and drawn on his personal connections extensively. It was also exceptionally presumptuous.

"I do not mean to steal from you," Morgaine said. "Only that, while keeping your shares of profit, you might eventually pass the reins to someone who might truly make this a home for our kind."

He frowned.

"And who would that be?" he asked.

"Your brother," Morgaine firmly said.

Oliver started in surprise.

"Roland does not know how to run a shop, much less deal with the House," he said.

"He is young," the dark-eyed sorceress said. "You can teach him."

That was... not untrue. And it would keep the shop in the family, which settled some of Olivier's troubles with this. Yet he was balking at the notion, some part of him refusing to even seriously think of it.

"Consider it," Morgaine quietly said. "That is all I can ask."

She left him to the silence of the darkened shop, lost in thought.

Charlatan IV

"We like to tell each other devils are the true face of wickedness, for it makes evil into a monster we can vanquish. A sword cannot settle the banal cruelties decent folk inflict on each other, you see, though these do more evil in a day than a flock of devils in a year."

– King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

Spring had brought troubles, at first, but what followed was stranger.

The ice broke and melted, and it was as if the world had been uncorked. A hundred things were pouring out onto sleepy little Beaumaraais, each coming quicker than the last. First the muddy mountain paths found early travellers, another pair of mages from the low country, and Olivier was barely done settling them in a house when word came that a company of riders from Apenun was headed the town's way. Lady Mireille Lassier, Alisanne's mother and the ruler of the city, had heard rumours and sent some of her men to have a look at the town. It was the same highborn officer as last time who led them, Captain Alain, and the man developed an interest in the arrangement around the shop that had Olivier wary. They were not yet ready, he felt, for such scrutiny. Alisanne was of a different opinion.

"Now is the time to make bargains," she told him. "Your numbers are rising but still small, you've proved you are able to settle affairs with townsfolk without resorting to unsavoury means and

the shop is popular with the people of the town. You will never have a finer hand to play, Olivier."

He could not refuse to speak with the captain, anyhow, so there was little choice to be had. The officer asked probing questions but to the younger man's surprise he was polite and respectful throughout. A degree of surprise must have shown, for Captain Alain amusedly addressed it.

"Lady Alisanne has taken a shine to you, all agree, and she has been part of this from the start," he said. "I would not harbour great hopes there were I you, but I'll not act the bull over a matter where one of Lady Lassier's daughters has been so involved."

Olivier managed not to blush, wondering if the other man knew how much of a shine had really been taken, and the implication of marriage he chose not to address. He'd never had any illusions there, so there was no hope to disappoint. The captain requested to be allowed to visit the shop and see some of the enchanted wares that had already begun to sell and seemed rather impressed.

"The wizards we've in Apenun insist only spells can chase away vermin properly, not artefacts," he told the younger man. "Many will be pleased to hear the truth is otherwise. There is much coin to be had there, Master Olivier."

Though Alisanne had not been part of the conversation of the visits, keeping to at least a thin pretence of not being his accomplice in every way, Olivier wasted no time in calling on her as the captain retired for the night. Though the febrile energy that'd taken the both of them was first spent in a more pleasant way, they spoke at length after. The young man admitted to a fear this entire arrangement would be shut down, or at least severely curtailed, but Alisanne enthusiastically disagreed.

"Wizards are dead useful to nobles, Olivier," she said. "The issue is that much of the taxes levied on them are levied by the Highest Assembly, so neither princesses nor ladies can waive them. That and no one is comfortable allowing the old guilds to rise again. There is only so much influence to go around, and what they might gain will have to be lost by someone."

"If we grow too much, shop or not we will be as a guild," he pointed out.

"The House of Light already has hooks in you, so you won't seem a threat," the grey-eyed beauty smiled. "And you won't want to keep all the mages here forever, will you? There's only so much use for them in a town the size of Beaumaraais, and too many will make the people uneasy."

Olivier's brow creased in thought.

"You would see us turn into a school of sorts," he said.
"Teaching mages profitable skills then releasing them into the world."

"Even that drunk Maxime would have a use, if you go down this path," Alisanne said. "He knows war, for all his empty bragging, and a few wizards so trained would make even a country lord's retinue something to reckon with."

"The House will object," he said.

"The priests will want the right to dictate where those wizards go, no doubt, but too many in the higher ranks will see the use of this," she denied, shaking her head. "Magic made to serve the influence of the House would be a delicious turn in their eyes, I imagine."

Everybody would benefit in the world she painted with her words, Olivier thought. Everybody, though perhaps the mages the least of the lot. *You have made yourself into the lord of this little town's wizards*, Morgaine had accused. And here was now, plotting to barter away their hours without consulting even one of them. There'd been just enough truth to her words, he thought, for them to sting. Yet the thought of simply handing this all over to someone else was an ugly one, and perhaps deep down handing it over to Roland made it worse. What had his brother done to deserve being given all this? Olivier had thought himself beyond those old jealousies, but perhaps he was not. It had been one thing, when he had a path of his own, but not Roland was encroaching on even that and this was a harder pill to swallow.

He told Alisanne none of it, for the thoughts shamed him, and instead simply held her close.

Captain Alain left within days, away to report what he had seen to Lady Lassier in Apenun but his parting words to Olivier were encouraging. It was more than a month before he returned, and in that span yet another mage came over the mountain paths. It was more practitioners than Olivier could ever recall hearing of being in the same place, save in old stories. It was exhausting to organize it all, to keep incidents from happening in the first place instead of simply reacting to them, but it needed to be done. When Captain Alain returned it was with a royal magistrate and a certain Brother Elian, whose name Sister Maude went stiff at. Olivier was brought in for a more formal conversation at the mayoress' own home, though she was gently evicted for the duration of it.

Brother Elian was one of the greats of the House in Apenun, while the royal magistrate was the one who habitually dwelled in the same city. This would be, Olivier understood without being told, the moment that determined how this would all end. He felt ill-

prepared for such a trial, but he would not flinch away in the face of the unexpected.

Though he left convinced he'd doomed them all, the evening brought different results. A glowing Alisanne ambushed him with an enthusiasm that saw them distracted for some time before telling him she'd just spoken with Captain Alain and learned he had, somehow, convinced these people that he knew what he was doing and it was a worthy enterprise. Both the royal magistrate and Brother Elian had given their blessing to the arrangement, though already there was jostling about how the services of certain mages might be 'leased' and who should get primacy over the other. Beaumaraais' sudden rise in importance was expected to be bringing people and coin to the town, as well, and it would be quietly arranged that it would get an appointed magistrate and eventually elect its own.

"Apparently my mother has decided this means I am not entirely bereft of political instinct," Alisanne wryly told him. "I have been recalled to Apenun, where my fate going forward is to be decided."

Olivier had known it was only a matter of time, yet he was startled by how grieved he felt at the thought he might never see her again. He'd believed himself hardened to the prospect, but perhaps that was simply a lie he'd told himself. He would not make a scene, the young man told himself. It was beneath them both.

"I will miss you sorely," Olivier quietly said.

Grey eyes turned to him, confused.

"It will only be for a month or two," Alisanne told him, stroking his side. "I'll be back before you know it."

He blinked in surprise.

"You intend to return?" he asked, sounding like a fool even to his own ear.

"There's more than sharing your bed that keeps me here, Olivier," she said, tone cooling. "Though I had expected even that might mean more to you than it seems it does."

"You would be giving up a wealthy and exciting life," he slowly said.

Apenun was not a grand city, in the greater scheme of things, but it was still as another world from the likes of little Beaumaraais nestled in the mountains.

"I'll be wealthy regardless, and you overestimate the excitement there is to be had as the seventh child of a noblewoman," Alisanne said, eyes searching his face.

She paused.

"Did you really think I would cast you aside as soon as the call to return to Apenun came?" she asked.

The answer to that now shamed him, so he did not answer.

"I have feelings for you," Olivier artlessly confessed, "but I harbour no expectation of permanence. It would not be difficult for you to find better prospects."

"I'm not offering marriage," Alisanne frowned. "But you have been my lover for near half a year now, Olivier. It is not a small thing and I'd not have it treated as such."

"I would not have you feel bound to something you began away from home and bereft of company," he plainly said.

"I can decide for myself whether I should feel bound to something, Olivier," she said, and if her tone earlier had been cool it was now frigid. "I do not need you to settle my own affairs for me."

It is a well-meaning condescension you offer, but condescension nonetheless, Morgaine had accused. Making decisions for others without truly understanding them, what they wanted. To see that sentiment reflected in Alisanne's grey eyes made it impossible to deny the sorcereress' words.

"I meant no offence," Olivier said.

"You have given it regardless," Alisanne evenly said. "Perhaps it would be best for us to be apart for some time, yes?"

It was not truly a question but he nodded in assent, hastily dressing himself from the clothes littering the ground. She looked at him as he did, and for a moment hesitation flickered in her eyes.

"We will speak when I return," the grey-eyed beauty said, face conflicted.

She did not stop him when he left, and he did not try to stay.

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It took six months for Alisanne Lassier to return to Beaumarais.

Six months where Olivier grew increasingly restless, his hours always fully used yet somehow never in a way that felt

satisfying. Another four wizards and witches came over the span, and there were now simply too many to host even when spread out between the shop, the family home and the house they'd bought at the edge of the town. After consulting with Mayoress Suzanne, they'd agreed it would be best if a house was raised away from Beaumarais. The townsfolk were growing uncomfortable with the amount of practitioners around Beaumarais: too many had come, and too quickly. In a twist of irony, the location that was settled on was the Knightsgrave. The small valley wasn't too far from the town, it had a small river for drinking water and no one used it as grazing grounds because of the old legends.

Eager to avoid old mistakes, Olivier put it to the mages themselves. The notion was a popular one – in some ways the practitioners were just as uneasy about the townsfolk as the townsfolk were about them – though there would have to be rotations in who got to sample the comforts of the town instead of staying out in the mountains. The greatest matter of debate was the shape the lodgings out in the Knightsgrave would take.

"It should be a tower," Morgaine said. "There are many magical reasons why this is preferred dwelling of our kind, and so close to the mountains we will not lack for stone."

Olivier thought the raising of a mage's tower out in the wilds was a lot more likely to bring unease than a hall or cottage would have, but Morgaine's suggestion was highly popular and he would not deny these people without a good reason. Not after having asked them what they wanted. Coin was sparse but a loan was extended by the House of Light through Sister Maude, as the priests were eager to demonstrate that it was they who were the patrons of this arrangement and not the rulers of Apenun. Olivier found his brother began to come around more frequently, though never as much as when they'd been younger. The relationship felt only half-repaired, but neither of them had the time to spare for more. Roland simply had too much to do, too much to learn. He was a student to half a dozen practitioners now, not merely their parents and Morgaine.

They saw him as their future, Olivier realized. Someone who would be able to speak for them yet be one of them. Morgaine had not lied on that night.

Before winter the magistrate Apenun had assigned them arrived, along with a small retinue. They were put up in the temple until more fitting lodgings could be raised. Olivier called on her the evening of their arrival, heart split.

"Did you miss me?" Magistrate Alisanne Lassier smiled.

He had, more than words could properly express. They got to work together again, and already the old tension hung in the air between them. The same way it had before they'd begun. Before

they'd quarrelled, too. When spring came Olivier took the first good excuse he found to return to the road, lest he find himself making an inevitable mistake.

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The road did him good.

Out there he went, sifting through towns and countryside looking for mages who had not yet heard of the refuge that could be found in Beaumaraais. He obtained contracts for enchantments against vermin, for tools that would not rust, for brews that would help childmaking or prevent it. And he returned to Beaumaraais, often but not for long. There the town grew to thrive, the coin poured in by peddlers seeing houses raised and shops open. People came to live in Beaumaraais who had not been born there, or been brought in by kin and wedding, for the first time in living memory. Magistrate Alisanne saw to the order of it all with bewitching grace, her natural aplomb a fair match for the demands of the office. The tower out in the mountains slowly grew and the practitioners were drawn towards it. The shop would be how they won their coin, how they afforded to live, but the tower would be their *home*.

Olivier stayed on the road, drawing the closest towns and villages into the fold of what was being built. Justice need not be sought in Apenun now, not when there was a magistrate in Beaumaraais. All manners of old disputes could be settled at last. Those few he'd taught how to read and write remained bound to him by gratitude, and they were all from families of importance: the town of his birth was, slowly but surely, becoming the heart of the settlements in the Vermillion Valleys. Olivier longed for grey eyes and a quiet laugh, but found himself reluctant to return to what the two of them had once been. She must have been as well, for while they lingered close to one another neither ever reached out through that slight, final distance separating them.

These days he felt reluctant to stay in Beaumaraais at all. Out there Olivier found he thrived: wherever he went, he found success. He talked around peddlers and craftsmen to bring Beaumaraais into their routes, secured a proper mason's help for the tower. He even picked up a few disaffected fantassins ready to turn bandit and convinced them instead to turn into a company under contract by half a dozen towns to keep the mountain paths *clear* of bandits. Even the House of Light was danced with, as Sister Lucie of Grisemanche was recalled in disgrace when she was found to have taken payment for healing travellers instead of offering it freely as was her duty. It was all *exciting*. Something he was good at, something he'd been meant to do. Unlike looking over the shoulders of mages in Beaumaraais, something they resented of him and he disliked doing in the first place.

By the second year the practitioners had taken to pooling their knowledge and a library was being assembled in the more than half-done tower, and while Olivier would have loved to read through the books there he often felt unwelcome when he visited. The mages who nowadays stayed in the Knightsgrave, having raised tents and small huts there, had started to think of themselves as a small village of their own. They did not like the notion of being beholden to anyone. Morgaine and his brother had taken to staying one week there and another in town, and eventually given Olivier's frequent absences it became natural for Roland to be given the responsibility of seeing to the affairs of the valley. It was better this way, Olivier told himself. He closed his eyes to Roland being rather well versed in poetry, these days, and spending much of his time in Beaumaraais calling on Alisanne.

For three years it all grew. The town, the tower, the profits. Rumour had spread that enchanted wares could be bought in the mountains and so now a caravan of peddlers came every spring, while the highborn of Apenun had their orders conveyed by riders along with the payment. Beaumaraais had swelled, and these days Mayoress Suzanne and Magistrate Alisanne were considered the grandees of the region. Olivier himself was known, but not as much. He preferred it that way. There was talk that soon a petition to the court of Prince Arsene of Bayeux might be arranged, requesting that someone might be raised to formal rule over the Vermillion Valleys, and Alisanne's name was the one bandied about. The notion found some popularity even away from the town, largely because the magistrate herself was popular.

Winter was ever the season Olivier spent in Beaumaraais, and on that third year he'd come a month early as he had a few affairs to see to in town. It was his habit to call on Alisanne the day he returned, no matter the hour, but he was surprised to see his brother leave her house well two hours after sundown. Roland looked just as surprised to see him, and for a moment Olivier was taken aback by how much taller his little brother had become. Roland had grown into a man while he wasn't looking: his shoulders had broadened, he had a short beard and even wore a knife at his hip. The wonder went away when he remembered where he'd just seen his brother leave, and at what hour.

"Olivier," Roland smiled. "Back so soon, this year?"

The smile was, he thought, too stiff.

"Out so late, Roland?" Olivier replied, and did not bother to smile.

"There's no call for that face, brother," Roland said. "I was only having dinner with a dear friend. We share great hopes for the future of Beaumaraais."

His little brother, still taller than him, began to walk past Olivier but paused.

"Besides, even if I did have other designs are the two of you not done?" Roland asked. "There would be no call for bruising."

Olivier's eyes narrowed.

"I sometimes dislike the man you're growing into, brother," he said.

"Then perhaps you should have been around more, brother," Roland replied.

He walked away and did not turn back. Olivier breathed out, calming himself, and only then called on Alisanne. He was ushered in by the servants and brought to her small parlour, where she was having a glass of wine. Alone, he noticed. There was no second, empty glass. *It could have been removed.*

"Olivier," she smiled, waving him in and inviting him to sit. "Back early, this year."

"So I've been told," he said. "Twice now."

Her brow rose. He bit his tongue. He had no right to feel jealous, he reminded himself. They had not been lovers for years now.

"Your brother is the soul of persistence," she said. "It is somewhat flattering."

"Is it?" he quietly asked.

"None of that now," she replied, just as quietly. "For years I thought you might apologize, that we might begin anew. You never did. Our friendship is dear to me as well, Olivier, but it is not a friend who speaks to me now."

"No," he admitted. "It is not. Do not think too badly of me for it."

Alisanne kept silent for a long moment.

"Jealousy is something, at least," she said, eyes unreadable.

She drank from her cup, then rose to pour him one as well. His lips felt parched when he drank.

"I am not involved with your brother," Alisanne said. "Nor have I ever been."

Relief. Relief, however guiltily it might come.

"He has, however, been courting me for years," she continued. "And tonight he sought my hand in marriage."

His fingers clenched around the rim of the cup.

"Tell me you refused him," Olivier prayed.

"I did not answer," Alisanne said. "Too swift a refusal would have been indelicate."

He drank deep to hide the way his hand had trembled.

"He is not in love with me, Olivier," the grey-eyed beauty mused. "He has taken with my looks and thirsts for lordship over these mountains, which he fancies wedding me might grant him."

"I did not think him so ambitious," he confessed.

"Morgaine has been fanning those flames, along with the dream of a hidden city for mages," Alisanne said. "Though I'll not blame her too much for that: there were already embers there to fan."

"I've let a lot of things grown rotten, haven't I?" Olivier softly said.

"There's a light in you, on those days you come back from the road," Alisanne said. "A glow almost. When you've traipsed around like a rogue, tricking and helping and trading in knowledge. It was hard to grow angry with you, when what you did make you so blatantly happy."

"It has," Olivier admitted. "Yet I regret what I left behind."

She studied him again, silently.

"Apologize," Alisanne ordered.

"I am sorry," Olivier said, "for how it ended between us. And for every day since."

"Good," she said, and kissed him.

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It was a soft night, after that. Patient and tender, almost like a goodbye. They slept in the same bed for the first time in years and neither woke until late in the morning. Olivier woke first but waited until she did, moving as little as possible to not wake her. Eventually her eyes fluttered open, and they stayed nestled together for a long time.

"You're going to leave, aren't you?" he asked.

Alisanne sighed.

"Three years is long enough," she said. "Beaumarais is now capable of electing its own magistrate."

"And you are growing bored," he said.

"I am," Alisanne admitted. "The tower is nearly done, the affairs with the mages quite settled and the rest is... middling."

"When do you leave?" Olivier asked.

"In a few days," she replied. "I might return come summer to oversee the election, but it is not certain."

He breathed out.

"Would you stay, if I asked?"

His own question startled him, but embarrassed as he might be to have asked he did not regret having done so. Grey eyes met his.

"No," Alisanne said. "But it doesn't need to end, Olivier. Come with me to Apenun."

"I cannot," he replied instantly.

"Think about this, actually stop and *think*," she insisted. "You'd go mad, staying here all year, and I'd not stand to be your port of anchor when it's too cold and nothing more. But in Apenun, you could *thrive*. Already your work here has made you known in some circles, opportunities could easily be arranged. I'll find an occupation of my own, and we can live as we want to live. Not bound by half a dozen uneasy threads, forever defined by your family."

"I can't abandon all we built here, Alisanne," he said.

"Then don't," she said. "Roland wants it, so let him prove he can lead. You'll still have shares of the profits, coin to live comfortably, and you can return in a year to see how he's done without you looming over him."

And Olivier wanted to object but the truth was that he was already gone most of the year, wasn't he? What was it that was lost if he left? The more he thought of it, the less he had to say. He did not agree, leaving their bed later and burying himself half-heartedly in the shop's bookkeeping, but the thought did not leave him. He returned to Alisanne's home that night. She knew his answer before he spoke it, as she often did.

A hundred things would need seeing to before then, but when she left he'd leave with her.

Olivier woke up to screaming on the night before their departure.

He'd slept at the shop, as he'd been there until late seeing to the last details, and he dressed hastily before slipping into the street. Beaumaraais was ablaze, he saw. Armed men on horses were tossing torches onto houses. The militia had come out, but it was a small thing these days and Olivier saw several of them were already corpses. The horsemen were eerily silent as they went around burning and killing, and it was hard to tell how many of them there were. A dozen, two? One of them was knocked down by a vivid red fireball, as Maxime Redflame came out of the tavern drunkenly bellowing and waving about his arms, and they all turned towards the threat. Olivier took advantage of the distraction to sneak past the nearest raider, towards the east of the town.

Alisanne's house would be there, along with her small but well-trained armed retinue. The House of Light was close as well, and these days Sister Maude had help from other priests capable of wielding Light. Except that when he got there, the house was strewn with corpses. Soldiers and servants, even a young priestess. Olivier frantically looked through the butchery, but of Alisanne there was no trace. Or of the raiders themselves, though from the way the blood was spilled at least some of them must have been killed forcing the house. Had she been taken? Livid with fear and rage, Olivier stumbled onto a mess in the gardens that looked like it'd been made by someone struggling as they were dragged. There were horse tracks leading away from there, away from the town. Into the mountains.

Olivier followed.

The horsemen had not been careful when they left. Only a few had left by the path, two or three, and though on a rocky stretch Olivier lost their trace he knew well these mountains. This path in particular, which he'd first tread as a boy. Once upon a time, it had been a rite of passage among the children of Beaumaraais to sneak out in the night and steal a flower from the valley known as the Knightsgrave. Stomach dropping as unwelcome but inevitable suspicions took hold of him, Olivier sped through the dark mountain paths. Above him the moon lit his way, and vigour like he'd never known before made his stride long and sure and tireless. Before long he stood above the stretch of a small valley filled with tall grass and red flowers by a mountain spring, though now there was more. Tents and huts, close to the shore, and a stout tower jutting upwards that was now nearly done.

The Knightsgrave was almost empty, Olivier saw.

Of the near dozen mages who lived here even in winter there was no trace. Two raiders stood silent in the night, their tall form a stark contrast to the red flowers around them, while their

horses drank from the mountain spring. The tower's door was open, and torchlight flickered within. Olivier no longer had a boy's body, but he was still spry and the raiders were both eerily still and inattentive. Too still, he eventually realized. They did not breathe at all. *Undead*, he thought. *Merciful Gods, Roland, what have you done?* He snuck past the standing corpses, sticking to the tall grass until he was close to the tower. He peeked within and found only a single silhouette within. Morgaine. Sitting in an armchair, looking down at the fire roaring in the firepit.

Anger seizing hold of him, Olivier slipped into the tower and crept upon the sorceress from behind. There was a small paring knife on a table and his fingers closed around the hilt. About to place the blade against the throat, he stopped when he got a look at more than Morgaine's side. She was burned, heavily. Most of the left half of her torso was a blackened ruin and her breathing was laboured. The sorceress' dark eyes fluttered open and she caught sight of him. She let out a small, bleak laugh.

"You," she said. "Of course it would be you."

"Where is Alisanne?" he asked.

"Upstairs," she croaked. "Gods, the folly. It all went wrong."

"You did this," Olivier hissed.

"No," she denied. "It was not the plan at all. They were supposed to attack as you left. We would drive them away, the girl would..."

Morgaine let out a dry, rasping cough.

"The girl would owe us," she said. "Her mother. Roland would be a hero, the natural magistrate."

"You raised corpses," he accused. "So that they would serve you."

"We," she snorted. "Me, him. For protection. This place was already a grave of knights, we just needed to dig."

"Your *protection* is burning the town," Olivier snarled. "You have destroyed everything with your madness."

"You did this," Morgaine hissed. "He went mad when he learned the girl would leave with you. That he'd never be lord, that he was just a fool. It was all you. My plan would have fixed everything, but he lost it. Sent our soldiers for the girl, and when I tried to stop him..."

Olivier looked down at the sorceress, burned by her own pupil and pride. Even now it was all his fault in her eyes, wasn't it? And maybe it was, in a way. Because he'd chosen the thrills of the road and the chase rather than stay here and see this through.

Because he'd chosen to be someone at the expense of being a brother. Maybe he'd had a hand in this, if not the one she thought. And the truth he knew, deep down, was the same truth he'd known since he was a boy: no one else was going to fix this. To try to make it right. It was not his place to pass judgement over that dying woman before him, for he was neither a lord nor a magistrate, but it still needed to be done. And he'd had a hand in this, in the magic that had gone to wicked use here, and so he would also have a hand in ending it all.

"Too many people have died, Morgaine," Olivier said.

She tried to raise her hand, lips beginning an incantation, but however quick her magic it was not quicker than a knife. It went straight into her heart and Morgaine gasped out her last breath with a hissing curse. Olivier ripped out the knife, bloodying his hand. It was the first time he'd ever killed. The anguish he'd expected to feel from having taken a life did not come, even after a long moment passed. He felt tired, mostly, and sad that a woman who'd been exceptional in many ways had come to die like this. It'd been a bitter flame at the heart of her, and it'd ended up eating her from the inside. *We lit it*, Olivier reminded himself. Magic hadn't done that, men and women had. With the ways they treated each other, with the slow strangling grasp of something subtler and deeper than sorcery could ever be.

Bloody knife in hand, he looked at the stairs. This might not be the last life he took tonight. Even as he went up the stairs, Olivier's mind dreamed up what a monster his brother might have turned into. A raving and ranting madman, or a warlock wreathed in pale lightning.

Instead, what he found was Roland on his knees and weeping.

His little brother looked terrified, the look on his face making the beard he'd grown and the broadened shoulders look like they belonged on someone else's body. Alisanne had been laid down on a cot in a corner, her hands folded over her lap with delicate care. She was slumbering too deeply for it to be anything but the result of a spell. He could have snuck in, Olivier knew. Roland was lost inside himself, he wouldn't have heard it. Merciful Heavens, his brother wouldn't have noticed a thing until the knife took his life. And it'd be safer, wouldn't it? If Roland's magic could defeat even his old teacher's, what could a peddler with a paring knife do against it? But that would mean that his brother was his enemy. And fool that he was, Olivier could not accept that.

He set down the knife on a table and knelt by his brother's side, pulling him close. Roland did not fight him, let it happen, but his eyes were unseeing. It was only after some soothing that sense returned to them.

"Ollie?" his brother asked, voice hoarse from the weeping.

"I'm here," Olivier quietly said.

"I-" Roland said, then his voice broke. "Gods, what have I-"

He violently retched, breaking out of his brother's embrace and throwing up on the floor. Looking scared and ashamed, Roland backed away from him afterwards.

"The magic," he said, "it was worse than wine. I was in a haze, and I was so *angry*..."

"Your undead attacked the town," Olivier said. "Morgaine is dead."

"Morgaine," Roland hissed, "*Morgaine*. It was her who convinced me. Who told me we would never get our dues fairly, that we needed to raise the corpses. I never wanted to, you have to believe me."

It began, slowly, to dawn on Olivier. But he did not want to look it in the eye, fought it tooth and nail.

"Alisanne," Roland suddenly said, "what-"

He glanced back and relief touched his face when he found Alisanne was asleep on the cot.

"She won't wake until the spell is broken," Roland said. "She... she doesn't need to know. Olivier, you have to help me. I never meant to *hurt* anyone."

He was aching behind the eyes with the effort of not seeing it, but he was losing the war. It felt inevitable, inexorable.

"What do you want me to do, Roland?" Olivier softly asked.

His brother did not notice the soft, steely undertone. Perhaps he would have tread more lightly if he had.

"Morgaine is dead, or good as," Roland said. "And it was her idea from the start. We can tell people... Alisanne is the magistrate, and she trusts you. If you tell her it was all Morgaine she'll believe it."

Dragged up by the hair and forced to look the truth in the eye, Olivier saw it plain for the first time: his brother was not a good man. Magic had nothing to do with it, or little enough it hardly mattered. The older brother stayed silent, trying to fight the revelation but finding little to fight it *with*. Roland's eyes went hard when he got no reply.

"Trying to get rid of me, are you?" Roland said. "Now that you have all you wanted, time to do away with the mage brother before you buy yourself a title. You owe me, Olivier. If you hadn't taken her, I never would have-"

The other man bit down on the sentence, but the hardness in his eyes did not waver. *It was never the magic, was it? It was you, Roland. All along it was you.*

"It's your fault," Roland harshly said. "You know it is."

"I do," Olivier quietly replied.

And it truly was. If Olivier had not left the family home as quick as he could, if he'd not left his brother behind, it might not have come to this. But he'd avoided the place as much as he could because it brought a bitter taste to his mouth. Because he wanted to leave it behind. And he had, but he'd also left behind more than the house. There were so many ways this could all have been avoided. If he'd not taken to the road, if he'd not left so many things half-said, if he'd found it in him to not see, deep down, his own brother as a rival. He'd left Roland to stew in a cauldron of anger, and so anger was what Roland had learned.

Too slow to notice, too slow to act.

All that was left, now, was to look at a man who had used his magic to throw a murderous tantrum when denied what he wanted. And the thought disgusted Olivier, because in the end it would be others who paid the price for this. When it came out Roland had raised the dead, had been responsible for so many deaths, then the House of Light would smash all of this to pieces. And their town would be spoken of as an example as to why mages could never be trusted, never be listened to, when the lot of wizards was next questioned. *Have you heard of the fate of Beaumaraais, my child*, a thousand Sister Maudes would say, tutting about how it was so sad but you just couldn't expect differently of *that sort*.

"You can't have done this," Olivier finally said. "It would ruin it all."

"Yes, exactly," Roland said, licking his lips.

It couldn't be Morgaine, either. She was too well-known, it would be almost as damning. The undead were the keystone, for what Proceran mage would dare dabble in necromancy? There was a ready-made culprit on the other side of the valleys: Praesi warlocks with their wicked arts, who had wanted to ruin the good work of reliable Proceran wizards. Olivier himself had once falsely claimed that bandits who'd robbed him had been in the pay of Praes, the precedent would make it more believable to highborn always keeping wary eye on the east.

"There is a spell that could make her more suggestible when we wake her," Roland told him. "Nothing untoward, just as if she'd had a large cup of wine. It would-"

"You should not have magic," Olivier said, and believed every word.

No more than he should have a sword or a lordship, had he been born to either. His fingers itched with the truth of it, as if something were trying to claw its way out from beneath the skin. Roland cracked a scornful smile.

"It should have been you, right?" he said. "You manage to go a great many years without saying it, brother. I'm almost impressed."

"You have abused your power," Olivier said slowly, as if testing out the words. "You no longer deserve to hold it."

"I was *born* with it, Ollie," Roland hissed. "There it is, the simple truth: I was born with it and you weren't. And you've been trying to take things from me all my life to make up for that, but it won't ever do anything because the Gods Above already decided which of us would matter when they gave the Talent to only one of us. Allow me to *demonstrate*-"

It was all, in that moment, clear as crystal. Every detail of the world around him, from Alisanne's steady breath on the cot to the slight coating of dust on the bookshelves to the flush on his brother's cheeks. And Olivier knew, with unearthly certainty, that it could be done. He'd spent all his life taking knowledge and putting it to use, and wasn't the knowledge always the hard part? And so when he saw sorcery flare around his brother's hands Olivier brushed his own against them, and took the magic. No, not took. He was not a wanton thief, stealing away whatever he wished. He had done this because the magic was being misused.

Confiscated, he thought. He had **confiscated** the power.

The word felt right, like an old friend he'd never met.

"What have you done?" Roland shouted. "What have you done, Olivier? Did you *destroy my magic*?"

No, Olivier knew. He hadn't it. He could feel something within him, like a bundle of warmth. Or perhaps a spool of wool, one that he might yet learn to unspin.

"It's over, Roland," he said. "You won't escape the consequences of this."

A shout was his answer, and to his surprise his brother charged him. Roland was taller and had caught him flatfooted, so Olivier

stumbled backwards into the table as his brother grabbed him by the hair and smashed his head against the wood.

"It will come back, if I kill you," Roland seethed. "Won't it?"

Olivier felt daze and his hands scrabbled for leverage so that he could throw back his brother, but his head was smashed again. Blindly groping, his fingers closed around something hard. A knife, he realized. The same bloody paring knife he'd killed Morgaine with. And if he struck now, while Roland had not noticed... And still he balked. Roland noticed.

"A pushover to the end," Roland sneered.

He ripped out the knife from Olivier's grip and tossed it behind him. The older brother closed his eyes and desperately reached for the bundle within him, the Talent, but there was something missing. He could not touch it, could not understand *how*. He was thrown down against the table again, head rapping against the wood, and his vision swam as he felt a hand close around his throat. There was a gasp, and the hand trembled as it loosened. Olivier kicked his brother away, gulping air desperately, and as his vision came back he found that Roland's mouth was open in a silent moan.

Alisanne Lassier, standing tall and cold-eyed, stabbed the paring knife in his brother's lungs a second time.

The death was startlingly quick. A few heartbeats was all it took before Roland slumped to the ground, first on his knees and then all the way down as the light left his eyes. Olivier found he could not look away, and that though Alisanne was speaking he could not seem to hear her words. It was as if the whole world had gone still and silent and dark, save for the sight of his brother's face in a growing pool of blood. Someone was touching him, he realized.

"- are you all right?" Alisanne said. "Did he hurt you?"

Olivier blinked, as if waking up from a deep sleep.

"No," he said, touching his throat and wincing at the bruising, "He didn't - I'm all right."

"We need to leave this place, Olivier," Alisanne told him, tone gentle but urgent. "We don't know if anyone else was helping him."

"We can't leave," Olivier tiredly replied. "Not when it's like this."

She looked askance at him, wary and confused.

"It can't have been them," Olivier said, hesitating. "It has to be me, Allie. It can't have been them, or everyone will pay."

"You're not making any sense," Alisanne slowly said. "You're in shock, Olivier. We need to leave."

Lies wouldn't be enough. Magic could, if it was the right kind, and Olivier had read the books. He knew the principles. Yet that perfect sphere he could so easily imagine – so easily he was not certain it was imagination at all – seemed beyond his reach. There was power there, but he could not use it. Frustration mounted in him. What had been the point, if he couldn't do any good with this? If he couldn't use his talent to do anything but subtract from the world? He had to be able to **use** it, or so many people would suffer for the madness of so few.

The world shivered.

Oh. It couldn't be about him, could it? It couldn't be selfish. There had to be a purpose. Thinking of what would come to pass, Olivier reached out for the sphere within himself and gathered the slightest lick of power. One of the easiest tricks of any mage was the making of fire, he'd heard. And as Olivier raised his palm a small trail of flame grew on it, though he snuffed it out even as Alisanne let out a loud gasp and stepped away.

"You're a mage?" she asked.

No, Olivier thought. Not even now that he had magic.

"I am a charlatan," he bitterly smiled.

He reached for the power again, and it came more easily this time. Even with his eyes closed to concentrate, it took him three times to successfully weave the illusion. He watched comprehension dawn in her grey eyes, watched the horror rise.

"No," Alisanne quietly said. "No, *please*. Olivier, don't do this. Don't take his face."

"Olivier de Beaumaraais died," he replied. "Slain along Lady Morgaine by the Praesi warlock who raised the dead and set them on the town and tower. He will be buried here."

Roland's body could fill the grave.

"Roland de Beaumaraais heroically drove back the Praesi but failed to kill him, and now pursues him to avenge his brother," he continued. "He wills all his possessions to Alisanne Lassier, to dispose of as she sees fit, as he will never return to Beaumaraais."

The deception would not hold, were he forced to uphold it around people who'd known them both. Illusions could only do so much.

"And when authorities seek out Roland to interrogate him?" Alisanna asks.

"He will not deign to be found," the man who was now Roland de Beaumaraais sadly smiled, "What do the wishes of men matter, to a rogue sorcerer?"

Five Stories

"Fate is as a towering tree: we see only the branches and the leaves, never guessing at the roots that tangle us all together."

Eudokia the Oft-Abducted, Basilea of Nicae

There is a tale, in Levante, about vengeance.

Once, long ago, an aging lord with three daughters ruled over a castle. This lord was a kind man, a just man, but also a weak man. And so when a cruel warrior grew hungry for his lands, the kind lord was slain by the warband and his castle taken as a prize. The three daughters were made into servants, and treated little better than slaves.

The eldest daughter was brave, and so one day she took up the sword and claimed the right of duel in honour. Bravely she died, for the warrior was cruel but he was a killer without peer. The second daughter was clever, and so one night she tipped poison into the warrior's wine. Cleverly she died, for the poison was not swifter than the healer and the warrior knew no mercy.

The youngest daughter was patient. She swore to the warrior she would never seek to take his life, and to prove this she took up neither iron nor the pouring of wine. She became instead a painter of hues and her skill was great, so she was praised and forgiven the trespasses of her kin. And patiently, every day, she painted a hidden knife within the work she gave the warrior.

And so the warrior grew wary, for from the corner of his eye everywhere he saw knives. Then he grew fearful, for the longer he sat on the lord's seat he had taken in blood the more knives were pointed at him. The warrior grew irate and capricious, his warband grew unruly for the mistreatment. Until one day the knives were not painted, for the warband rebelled and slew the warrior.

The youngest daughter stole his corpse, as the warriors fought for the lord's seat, and took him not to a barrow. Instead she painted a red knife across his throat, and left him for the wild dogs to tear at.

This was a well-known tale, fondly told by mothers to their daughters when blood grew heated and patience called for. It was not a grand tale, no Anthem of Smoke or Odes of Honour, but it was *known*. And so when Kallia of Levante burned her father's corpse and stirred the ashes into paint, when she traced a red knife on the door of the cruel Lady Abril, her declaration of war was heard across the entire city.

—

Helike was a city like a spinning coin, Rhodon had been taught as a child.

Every time a Theodosian came to rule, the Gods gave that coin a toss. Sometimes it led to a good king, a powerful king, and Helike thrived. Sometimes it led to a bad king, a weak king, and Helike was buried by its rivals. But sometimes, oh so rarely, the coin landed on the side and the whole of Calernia shivered as it whispered the word *tyrant*. It was all very poetic, Rhodon thought now that he was a man, but these days he was rather inclined to believe the Gods didn't even bother with a toss.

Mediocrity was the stuff of men, not divinely ordained. And such mediocrity did he behold! Rhodon Kabasilas was a young man of ancient lineage, a lord in his own right and descended from Theodosius the Unconquered's favourite mage, so his skill with sorcery had ensured he would have a prominent place at the court of King Peithon Theodosian. Old Peithon then started a war with Atalante, kept it going long enough to lose a major battle to their mercenaries and then inconveniently choked on a mouthful of olives.

Half the palace screamed of assassination, the other half began plotting a coup. When Rhodon was asked to examine the corpse the dead king's brother, Lord Timaïos, heard his verdict that this had been a genuine accident and smiled before suggesting he reconsider. Perhaps it had been poison, Lord Timaïos suggested. Perhaps the evidence even pointed to the king's young son and heir, Prince Amyntas.

Rhodon was interested in keeping his throat from being slit, so he politely agreed, but he discreetly sent warning to the young prince to hedge his bets. He decided he'd made the right choice when Amyntas escaped the city – helped, it was said, by a stranger in grey – and began gathering an army in the country. Lord Timaïos fatally blundered when he struck a very unpopular peace deal with Atalante, ceding farmlands, and within the year Timaïos was dead and Amyntas on the throne.

King Amyntas' very second act when he took the crown, just after offering amnesty to a few powerful nobles, was naming the loyal sorcerer who'd saved his life to the highest mage title of the court.

And just like that, Rhodon Kabalisas became the Royal Conjurer.

—

Alain considered his father to be an inspiration.

Magistrate Thibault Monduc was known as a fair and learned man, and this had been known far as far as the capital: Prince Amadis of Iserre had called Alain's father there, so that he might surrender his elected charge and instead become a royal magistrate of the Prince of Iserre. It was a great honour, Alain's father told his family, and they must live up to it in all things. They might be highborn but they held no lands and little wealth, and so their armour must be strict adherence to the law.

And so Alain set out to live up to his father's words. He took to his lessons with discipline, never lied nor cheated nor disgraced himself in any way, and he revelled in the pride he found on his father's face when he announced he wanted to be a magistrate as well. His father asked a favour, and Alain went to study under another magistrate as a scribe and attendant. Royal Magistrate Cristina was cold, but she was also experienced and willing to teach. He thrived as one of her attendants, and left her service with a commendation.

Not yet a man, Alain Monduc found that his family had fared very well in his absence. They now lived in a manse in a better part of the capital, and both his sisters were in talks for very advantageous marriages with young men of noble blood. His mother told him his father had bought into a fresh trading company, and struck gold. His sisters told him that their father had made friends at court who'd tipped him off to opportunities. His father chided him for speaking of coin, for it was crass trader talk, before simply saying he had made lucky investments.

And all the while, the lessons Alain had learned under Royal Magistrate Crisitina ticked in the back of his head.

The investigation itself was hardly difficult. The trading company existed, but traded no goods, and the other owners were all nobles and men with commands in the city guard. It was a smuggling ring, and his break-in into the warehouse revealed to Alain that the goods were largely Taghreb silverwork – illegal, the Dread Empire had been under embargo for over a century – and Ashuran spices. The spices were heavily taxed, so that would be the lucrative part.

The jewelry would be the difficult part, as there was precedent for the breaking of an embargo decreed by the Highest Assembly to be taken as treason. He wrestled with the decision for days. His father's guild was not in doubt, but he could truly condemn the

man to certain disgrace and possible death? And yet Alain knew he must: adherence to the law was not *negotiable*. This was *wrong*.

His father hanged, four courtiers were whipped out of the city and an alleged member of the Eyes of the Empire was caught. Alain Monduc was made a royal magistrate for his honesty, hollow as the title and praise felt. *Our most relentless magistrate*, Prince Amadis had apparently named him in court. It was an honour but also fetters, but he would not be the second Monduc to disgrace the name in this lifetime.

Alain still considered his father to be an inspiration, in a way.

—

Angelique hadn't *meant* to end up a poisoner.

It had been a very measured act, in her opinion. That little prick Henri was humiliating her brother — his lawful husband! — by running around with other men, getting drunk and fucking them in taverns like he was some sort of lord whose name would make him beyond reproach. Henri's family was very rich, it was true, and Angelique's had been bakers for as long as the family tree went back. Perhaps he'd thought he would get away with it.

So Angelique, chubby little Angelique with her rosy cheeks, who everyone always talked down to because she was a plump baker with a cutesy name — and didn't that mean she was a sugary idiot who could do no harm? — had slipped a few coppers to a man in the right tavern and arranged for a little something to be added to Henri's wine. He'd get a scare, learn not to go tramping around when he had a perfectly lovely husband waiting at home, and it would all be settled instead.

Henri got dead instead, which to Angelique's surprise turned out rather well for everyone else.

Her brother Jacques inherited Henri's wealth, the tavern was closed down after being accused of having had diseased wooden barrels and no one ever suspected a thing. Well, save the man she'd paid to slip a little arsenic in the ale and who had very clearly put the whole vial in there instead of the mere drops she'd told him to use. He tried to blackmail her, to get at Jacques' newfound wealth, so Angelique appeased him with baked goods fresh from the oven and told him she'd speak with her brother.

The idiot ate two pastries full of nightshade before even leaving the shop, which left with Angelique with no loose ends save a fresh body to get rid of. Still, even as she debated the respective virtues of using the oven or dragging the corpse to Old Julie's pig pen after dark, it occurred to her that there might just be a great deal of coin to be had in being a poisoner.

More than in baking, anyway, so why not?

—

Teresa became a veteran when she was thirteen.

The Princess of Segovia had, in her deep wisdom, realized that the towns and cities in the plains of Laranta should be paying taxes to her and sending the silver of the mines to her coffers. Alas the Prince of Orense has failed to share this opinion, and so a polite disagreement involving armies had ensued. Teresa herself was from Salamans and so cared not a whit for the squabble, but she did care about not being married off to the farrier's only son.

So she'd signed on with the Ten Thousand Blades and developed a burning enthusiasm for the cause of Princess Luisa of Segovia, Gods preserve her. The ambitiously named 'Ten Thousand Blades' had numbered three hundred fantassins when she signed on, but after participating in a battle in southern Laranta they were forty-four. Captain Leonte had been dismissive of pikes, much as the cavalry of the Prince of Orense had been dismissive of the notion of not trampling Captain Leonte. Teresa made a kill, took a wound and played dead for the rest of the battle.

She rose a decently wealthy woman, as Princess Luisa gallantly paid wages even after the disastrous defeat, and after taking her cut promptly moved on to a company slightly less likely to get her killed. The Iron Brotherhood had a good reputation, and a good captain: she served a full two years there. Officer's rank was kept within a circle of Cantal families, though, so she signed on with the Glorious Lions and was a serjeant when the company disbanded a year later after the captain bought a noble husband and retired.

She made lieutenant under the Grey Banners, deserting when the Prince of Tenerife refused to pay and the captains decided to turn bandit, and served two years as Captain Julie's second in the Folies Rouges. Things were looking up, she decided. Teresa then went bankrupt after founding her own company, the Salamanders, and immediately getting stiffed by Atalante — the priests had made sudden peace with Helike, and were not inclined to pay for mercenaries they wouldn't be using no matter what the contracts said.

She had to spend a year under a merchant lord in Mercantis training city guards until she was able to gut the bastard, rob his vault and blame it on one of his rivals. When Teresa returned to Procer, now twenty-two, she realized that most of the fantassins she'd come up with were dead or retired.

Youngbloods were now looking at her the same way she'd looked at grizzled fantassins, once upon a time.

—
First, Kallia came for them.

The guards wouldn't help, and the Old Palace didn't care. Lady Jibril was of the Blood, however meagre the line and its deeds. But Kallia was her father's daughter, quick and sure-footed and very good with a knife – it had taken four men to kill him, she remembered with hard pride, and one of them had still died – so she sought vengeance through the deeds of her own hand. She was told names, for in Levant the avenging of one's blood was a sacred thing, and she went on the hunt.

The first one was a boaster and a drinker, so he was easy to find leaving a tavern. And still she almost died. Kallia had never taken a life before, and found that her hand hesitated when the moment came. A scar on her side taught her never to repeat that mistake. The second she slew coming back from a brothel, smoothly and from behind. By the third she had grown bold enough to slice open his stomach in a crowded marketplace, feigning an embrace as she silenced him.

Each time she traced a red knife, a painted knife. There were some who might have ended the vengeance here, who would have counted it even with the death of her father's killers, but not she. The lips that had spoken the order still drew breath, and there would be no peace until Lady Jibril of the Slinger's Blood lay dead. But Kallia had forgot the lessons of her story. She had been brave and clever, like the sisters told. But it was not enough, she learned when she returned to see her home burning.

Second, they came for Kallia.

—
As the years passed, Rhodon found that he was not a patriot.

Not in the sense that orators used, those brave lads and lasses read to sacrifice life and fortune for the sake of Helike. Yet he'd been named the Royal Conjurer of a young king's court, and King Amyntas did have ambitions the mage respected. More importantly the young man had a practical bent, enough to know that if he was to ever curb the nobles he would need to marry into a strong alliance. The king's marriage to Lady Roxana was unhappy, and did not yield a child for years, but it did yield coin and steel.

Rhodon leant his skills to the cause of reform, weaving sorceries to spies on Amyntas' enemies and crush the spellcraft of their pet sorcerers. The king found victories at court, and his Royal Conjurer the same in the halls behind those of power: where men like him plied their dark tricks, and the battles were of subtler cast. His reputation rose and he found magic came... easier.

Especially when in service of the king. So when Amyntas first asked him to make a bastard child of his disappear, Rhodon did.

Lady Roxana had not yet given birth to a child, and Helike's successions tended to the bloody even when there were no such complications. It all went wrong: a rebellious noble found the boy and had him seized, so Amyntas was unable to simply put him on a boat to Ashur to be forgotten abroad. It got messy, and the Royal Conjurer unleashed his power without a thought to finesse – seventeen died, and the boy himself took a curse meant for another. He died on the way to the palace.

"You did what you had to, Rhodon," King Amyntas murmured into his ear. "Your loyalty to Helike is beyond question."

No, the Royal Conjurer was not a patriot. What was there to love? Under the gilding everything in Helike was rotten, not the least himself.

—

Relentless, they called Alain.

Some meant it as a compliment, others as an insult. None denied the truth of it, not even Royal Magistrate Alain Monduc. He must be relentless, tireless, or else what had he sent his own father to the noose for? He'd killed the man for the principles the same man had instilled in him, and it would kill him in an entirely different way if he now failed to lived up to them. Alain had caught Prince Amadis' eye, with that act, and now the Prince of Iserre considered him a curiosity of sorts.

One he meant to make use of, however, and this Alain embraced. In his first month he unearthed a ring of servant-burglars who'd been robbing the nobility for years, and discreetly enough few had even noticed. At the border with Cantal he caught fantassins under a false flag, pretending to be bandits, and even seized one of them to bring back to the court. He hunted deserters and thieves, killers and spies, and always he brought them to stand before the law. Every single time.

His fellow magistrates called him mad for the risks he took, the hours he kept, but they did not understand that if Alain failed in this then he was already dead. So when murders began to crop up around the capital, it was only natural for the prince's favourite hound to be called in. Yet this one was different, Alain realized. The killer slew for pleasure, and did it through impossible means: it was as if they could walk unseen and swift as the wind, as if they could bend steel with their strength.

And the killer knew of him, relentless Alain Monduc learned, when the first victim was dropped on his doorstep.

—

As it turned out, Angelique was very good at murder.

It was trifling easy to use her savings to buy a wagon, especially now that her brother had recently come into money, and she was hardly unusual in deciding to take to the road as a baker. It was a trade that saw her travel between cities quite a bit and meet all sorts of people, which in turn allowed her to find individuals whose life would be distinctly improved by a spot of murder. Assassin was a bit of a misnomer, really, as she preferred to use intermediaries or simply provide the means to the more entire enterprising sort. Still, it could not be denied she as very much a poisoner.

A *rich* poisoner, however, and one with many grateful patrons. In certain circles her reputation grew, and she began outright buying shops in certain cities as the means of her patrons – some of which now sought her out themselves! – grew along the reputation. She'd yet to kill royalty, though several people had approached her over the life of the First Prince, but she suspected it was only a matter of time.

Angelique studied the art and found she had knack for making her own poisons, even those written of on no pages. She was... unnaturally good at it, really. It was as if there was something guiding her hand, and it was the same when she was attempting to find servants and kinsmen who would turn on a target. Her instincts had always been good, and her demeanour did not invite suspicion, but these days success came easy.

Which is why it was a particularly unpleasant surprise, when one evening she found a kindly stranger awaiting her in her shop. An old man in faded grey robes, with soft words and smiles but eyes like death.

"You are nearing a crossroads, dear girl," he said. "Consider retirement, before someone less restrained takes notice."

It was not a suggestion, though he was polite enough to pretend otherwise.

—

The Great War did not come unbidden.

All the fancy scholars said it did, but Teresa knew otherwise as did many fantassins – though few as grizzled as her. The wars came easier than they had when she'd been girl, the princes were growing restless. Some talked of striking out east, against Helike's young king, but the First Prince would not hear of wars against the League. So instead the princes fought with words in the Assembly, and with companies on the field.

Iserre fought Cantal for rule of a river too shallow to bear fish. Aisne and Bayeux had three wars in nine months, each ending in brotherly peace. Brus, Lyonis and Lange tussled over a single silver mine. Teresa lost friends in each of those pissant wars, to nothing causes for feckless crowns, but was this not the trade? She marched under one banner after another across the span of Procer, learning all that there was to learn about dying.

Blood was in the air, Teresa could *smell* it. Even away from battle, passing through towns and wheat fields. The princes had grown hungry for more than the thin strictures of *just war* could give them. The aging fantassin was not surprised when the First Prince's sudden death was like a struck match, armies sprouting across the land like green shots after rain. This war would not be like the others, she could feel it in her bones.

She warned the others, but when had youngbloods ever listened to a grizzled old fool like her?

—

They took her, falling on her as she watched her home burn with the last of her family, and then Kallia knew only darkness. She woke in a dank and silent place, behind an iron-banded door. Once a day a pair of warriors came in and *hurt* her. She was not bound, and so she fought, but she was only healed enough not to die between the fights. After the pain, when she could no longer move, Lady Jibril always came to visit.

"Ask me to die," the cruel woman always demanded.

And instead Kallia traced her face with red, with her own blood.

"One day the painted knife will bite," she always replied, fingers coming away still-

—

-red, Gods there was so much blood on Rhodon's hands it was never going to wash off.

His king had finally fathered a son on his wife, a boy named Nicanor, but his reforms were stalling and so he turned to his Royal Conjurer to grease the wheels with red. Rhodon strangled with shadows and drove men mad with devil-dreams, but it was not enough. King Amyntas' fires weakened with every setback, until he was but a spent shadow of himself. He took to drinking dallying with dancing girls, sinking into pleasures.

When Lady Roxana tried to kill her husband and seize the throne for Nicanor, it was Rhodon who caught it. At the last moment, and the knife was already in her hand so there was no time for *delicacy*. Fire and air in a tight orb caught her shoulder and

Lady Roxana's torso burst like an overripe peach. Amyntas wept into his arms, the both of them covered in red and flesh.

"You are the only man I can trust," the king bawled. "That I will always trust."

The man that had once been Rhodon Kabalisas was dead, he thought as he patted the other monster's back. There was only the Royal Conjuror left.

The office left room for –

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– nothing else. Nothing else could claim even a sliver of Alain's attention as the royal magistrate hunted the killer that was *taunting* him. He burned bridges at court when he forced a search of nobles' quarters but got only a cooling corpse for it, the ambush he tried by the river got a dozen of the prince's men killed and all he learned was that he was facing one of the Damned. It was not enough. Noises were being made about taking him off this hunt at the court, now, so his hand was forced.

Alain took risks. He arrested a smuggler, claimed him to be the killer, and stashed him away in a cell in a guardhouse. And then he waited for the real monster to come, the Cutthroat he'd been hunting all this time. But the killer had been hunting him just as relentlessly all this time, he had not grasped. It was not for the bait the Damned came, but for him. The window opened without a sound, and all he caught was a glint of –

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– steel. Teresa caught the glint of steel in the noonday sun as the great armies moved into place like lumbering beasts. On the plains of Brabant proud princes and princesses had gathered to pressed claims to the greatest throne of Calernia, a most deadly affair. Teresa was a lieutenant for the Belles Lucioles now, in the service of Prince Etienne of Brabant, but she frowned as she realized the glinting of steel came from the wrong way.

There were horsemen coming towards the company, and so she roused the men to raise their spears and stand in ranks instead of mill about, but not enough listened. It was the pennants of allies that were seen in the wind, even if the horsemen were riding hard. When the riding did not slow, panic came, but by then it was too late. The battle would be called the Waltz of Fools, Teresa did not yet know, for this had been incompetence and not treachery.

Yet as the grizzled fantassin watched splendidly-clad horsemen break through an uneven row of spears, she could not help but ask herself why she was –

—

-still doing this. Angelique asked herself the question again, even as she considered how the poison might best be administered. Why was she still doing this? She was already wealthier than she'd ever dreamed she would be, connected to some very powerful individuals and courted by a great many pretty men. Interested more in her coin than her smile, perhaps, but it was still a pleasant diversion. It was a good life, a comfortably life.

So why was she risking it all by taking this contract by a mere country lord's second son, a nobody trying to claim his sister's inheritance by a drop of poison? Yet she'd not been able to refuse, even deathly afraid as she was of the old man with the blue eyes who'd smiled and warned her off the trade. It was not for profit, she was being forced to face that. Neither was it of a taste for killing, for the murder was largely a matter of indifference to her.

Angelique looked at her own face in the mirror. Red and plump cheeks, watery eyes. Titters came easy to her, and always would. There was nothing of herself she disliked, she'd admit to herself. But how it made people react to her... the dismissals, the condescension, the *patronizing tones*. These she could not stand.

"I am a poisoner," Angelique tried out, meeting the eyes of her reflection. "I am a poisoner, and I will not stop because I am—"

—

"-good at it," the Cutthroat smilingly said. "Do I need a deeper justification than this, my good magistrate?"

Alain struggled against the woman, the Damned, but her grip was unnaturally strong. Slowly the knife in her hand was coming close to his throat, but they both knew she was taking her time. Gloating, savouring his impotence and fear.

"You won't win," Alain hissed. "Even if I die. All you are is a child flailing in the dark. I am a royal magistrate of Procer, there are a hundreds who can take my place. Continue the work. You do not fight a man, you fight the law. And the law does not *relent*."

The blade pricked his skin, drawing a bead of blood as his teeth clenched in pain, and the Damned chuckled.

"There," she said. "For all your talk, so very—"

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– mortal,” Lady Jibril mocked. “Day after day you swear vengeance on me, and nothing happens. Do you not worry that I will lose patience, Kallia? That I will simply kill you?”

Kallia laughed in the other woman’s face. All these days here in the dark, tasting pain and left alone with her thoughts, but she had not gone mad yet. Because there was a sister left, in the story. Because sometimes patience bore fruit, because sometimes the Ashen Gods *answered*. And these days, when she dreamt down here, she dreamt of a painted knife and the way she held it.

“Then I will win,” Kallia said, and believed every word of it.

Lady Jibril frowned.

“Mad, then,” she said. “That is disappointing, but the Peregrine has returned to Levant so we must cut this short. I’ll not risk his attention for a diversion.”

Kallia’s enemy came forward, a curved knife in hand, intent on death. She could feel it in the air. Her limbs were broken, her breath weak, so she did not resist when Lady Jibril dragged her up to sit against the wall and set the knife against her throat. Kallia rasped out a wet laugh.

“There is a tale, in Levante, about vengeance,” she whispered.

“Mad,” Lady Jibril repeated with a sigh, and slit her throat.

And yet it was Jibril who bled, a line drawn in red across her throat by the Painted Knife.

Sometimes the Heavens-

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— smiled on you, Teresa thought as she woke up. Why else would she still be alive? Her company lay around her as a carpet of corpses, swept through by a *friendly* cavalry charge and then by a brutal and chaotic melee where friend and foe had been indistinguishable. Half a day the butchery had lasted, until soldiers collapsed in exhaustion, and now the crows picked at them all. Teresa, her leg broken, crawled around a dying horse and gasped as she looked up at the sky.

Eventually, she bound her leg and dragged herself up with a hoarse scream. Still alive. She’d lost her sword so she took another from a corpse, and stole boots to replace her own slashed-up ones. Teresa breathed out, and grasped that she was perhaps the only living person for a mile. There was fighting in the distance, but her entire company lay dead around her. And she saw, in that moment, the future that lay ahead of her through this great war and those beyond.

She would survive, again and again and again. Teresa would survive until she the only old hand left in this fucking trade, and she was not simply a grizzled fantassin but *the* grizzled fantassin. And when the thought came to her, she knew it to be true in a way beyond her understanding. Shivering, exhausted, the Grizzled Fantassin began limping towards the nearest town.

The business wasn't over yet, and she was still under-

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— contract. It was regrettable that Angelique would have to leave town and break it, but she'd heard rumours of an old woman with a sword having come from the country and begun asking questions about a poisoner. An old woman who'd casually snapped the arm of a guard, when he'd tried to force her out of town for having come in without paying at the gates. That was not the kind of enemy Angelique fancied confronting, so flight would serve.

And yet, even as she planned her escape, the poisoner found she felt... excited. Alive. It might be that the authorities would hunt her and the Chosen with them, but even if she feared this it also pleased her. It was like discarding a mask and finally revealing her face to the world. She'd held back for so long, hadn't she? Clutched wealth and comfort at the expense of what she truly desired, who she truly was.

Angelique's blood stirred more at the thought of finally attempting to poison First Prince Cordelia than it did at the thought of buying a another shop, so why had she so long clung to the latter at the expense of the former? No, she was not a baker or a trader or a socialite.

She was a Poisoner, and when she finally admitted it to herself the world shivered to the sound of her damnation.

What a relief, to look the truth of what she was-

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— in the eye. Rhodon found that admitting he was a monster had made him a worse man, but one more at peace with himself. And that peace seeped into every part of him, even as with an indifferent eye he watched Helike decay. The king's son Nicanor eventually fathered a son of his own, another boy named Dorian, but Prince Nicanor was as fond of revels as his neglectful father and snapped his neck in a drunken accident.

King Amyntas's grief startled some vigor back into him for a few years, until he fell in love with a dancing girl by the name of Thais and got it into his head to marry her after having gotten her pregnant. She died giving birth to some misshapen little creature the king was too disgusted to name — Rhodon stepped in,

whispering *Kairos* to the scribes – and Amyntas promptly sunk back into his old vices with a vengeance.

By then, Rhodon had been the Royal Conjurer for decades. He'd been a staple of the court for so long it did not remember the times before him, and that had... weight. The mage was not unschooled in such matters, and so he realized the pull when it came. Becoming Named, he found, was not some grand turn of fate. He'd simply settled in the groove, slowly but surely, over decades of being who he was. One day, when he thought of himself as the Royal Conjurer, the world simply thought it with him.

Sometimes that was all-

—

— it took. Keep faith with the world, and the world kept faith with you. Alain's fingers closed around the wrist of the Cutthroat and he began pushing her back. The knife left his throat. Her face darkened in anger and surprise.

"You struggle in vain," she sneered. "I need only take this seriously and—"

She pushed, but his strength matched hers. There was something in Alain, something that *burned*.

"It was always serious," the royal magistrate said. "It was never a game."

"Fuck you, prince's dog," the Cutthroat snarled, "your moralizing means nothing. You're the servant of a man just as bad as—"

"I serve the law," Magistrate Alain Monduc interrupted, snarling back, "I serve the people of Procer. And until I see justice done by them—"

His strength, for the slightest moment, overpowered hers. It would have been child's play to take the knife, he somehow knew. To seize it and slit her throat in the same smooth stroke. And the thought called to him, it did, for he was just a man. But Alain was still inspired by his father, both by the man who'd taught him and the man who'd failed him. So he took the knife, but it was his fist that struck the Damned.

"- I will not relent," the Relentless Magistrate swore, and placed the Cutthroat under arrest.

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Many years later, five people stood in the same room and were sent on an important task by a black-clad queen and a white-clad knight.

It was an ending but it was also a beginning, for stories never truly end.

Malanza

"It would be a curse to be born Good. If virtue were easy, if doing right was painless, Creation would have no meaning: what worth is there in a trial that does not try you?"

– Extract from the 'Truths of the Shore', a collection of the teachings of Arianna Galadon (considered holy text only in Procer)

I

The statue was titled '*Lorenzo Triumphant*'.

There were eleven statues of the famous Lorenzo Malanza within the city of Aequitan, and every single one depicted the man with long flowing locks and youthful good looks. Rozala, who had long admired the brilliant general who'd made the Malanzas into the rulers of Aequitan, had been disappointed to learn the depiction was something of a lie. By the time Lorenzo had been winning the great victories in Levant that ultimately raised him to princeship he'd been forty, balding and with a severe limp from a lance wound he'd taken in the leg.

Lorenzo Triumphant somewhat acknowledged the last detail by depicting a stylish bandage over the young conqueror's leg, but it only served to enhance the brimming heroism of the victor of Tartessos and Lazar Valley. The marble had been beautifully carved, though it was kept bare instead of the gaudy Free Cities painted manner, and the lance he raised manfully towards the sky was worked in gold leaf. Rozala had always hated the bloody thing, as it stood in the Shaded Courtyard. Where Mother made her wait on the bench near the wall until the Princess of Aequitan was finally ready to receive her.

Rozala had never once been made to wait here except when she was about to be punished, so that cursed marble statue was as ill an omen as there could be.

It was different today. Rozala had spent most of the last hour looking at the statue and the orange trees of the courtyard, wracking her mind to come up with a misdeed she'd done warranting punishment, but there had been nothing. She'd dumped worms in Hernan's pillows again, but the little shit hadn't caught on yet and now that he was nine he'd grown too proud to rat her out as eagerly as he used to. He'd asked for it, anyways, mocking her for having a hard time memorizing the first stanzas of the

'Tragedy of King Konrad'. Reitz was *hard*, and unlike her brother she wasn't getting any better at it.

The day broke from precedent again when instead of one of Mother's attendants it was Mother herself who came to find Rozala. Aenor of Aquitan, Rozala thought with pride, was still known as one of the great beauties of the south even in her dawning middle age for good reason. She didn't need glittering jewels or powders to impress, just a well-done braid and an elegant silken dress. One day, Rozala promised herself, she would be just as beautiful. Mother offered her a lovely smile before sitting by her side on the bench.

"Is there anything you would care to tell me, Rozala?" Princess Aenor meaningfully asked.

"Nothing at all," Rozala lied.

The tanned princess looked faintly amused.

"Your delivery needs work," Mother said.

Rozala said nothing, primly looking ahead and hoping if she did not move the subject would be dropped. Her mother was a skilled interrogator when she put her mind to it.

"But that is not why I sent for you today," Mother lightly added.

The ten year old girl breathed out in relief.

"May I know why I am here, if not to be punished?" Rozala asked.

"Most of your tutors will be dismissed this evening," the Princess of Aquitan said. "I will be taking care of your education personally, at least in some regards."

Though thrilled, Rozala forced herself to remain calm.

"Sister Lisella said last week that I was not yet ready for such tutelage," she said.

Mother looked at her with approval.

"I am hurrying the transition," the Princess of Aquitan agreed. "There are... growing undercurrents to the Ebb and Flow, my darling. I've come to believe the years ahead will bring with them great perils."

"Through peril, rise," Rozala replied without hesitation.

The words of the House of Malanza had been drilled into her since she could walk, along with the duty she had to her family and her people. Mother simply nodded, as if the answer had been a given.

"There will be opportunities," Aenor Malanza agreed, eyes coming to rest on the statue of their famous forbear. "Of the very same kind he found, I expect."

"It will be war, then?" Rozala softly asked.

"It might yet come to that," the Princess of Aquitan said. "So let us learn the lessons of Lorenzo's life, yes?"

Rozala turned attentive dark eyes onto her mother, waiting for the wisdom she had to impart.

"Have you ever seen a statue of Juan Osuna?" Mother asked.

The young girl startled in surprise at the question. The last name she recognized – how could she not, when the House of Osuna had preceded the Malanzas on the throne of Aquitan – but the given name took her shamefully long to place. Prince Juan Osuna was mostly known as Juan the Abjurer', in the histories, for he had been the last prince of the Osuna and abjured his right to throne before fleeing east into Salamans.

"I have not," Rozala admitted.

"The question was a trick," Princess Aenor easily said, "for you pass by such a statue every time your ride through the eastern gate."

The young girl blinked, and only then put the pieces together.

"The Wicked Elder is meant to represent him?" Rozala said, doubtful. "But the statue is of an old man, decrepit and... impious."

There was something unsettling about the statue's gaze, and the unseemly face it stared out of. It was somehow ribald and heinous at the same time. The young girl frowned, drawing back a strand of hair.

"I've been taught that Juan the Abjurer was fifteen, when renounced the throne," she added.

"He was," Mother thinly smiled. "And yet he lost, and so when he was still remembered at all it was as a hideous figure. While Lorenzo, who was nearly thrice his age, won and is now depicted as a golden youth all over the city."

The Princess of Aquitan continued to stare at the statue.

"It is the victor who decides who was wicked and who was righteous, in the end," Aenor Malanza told her daughter. "When that statue was first raised, my lovely, it was known as a lie. But who remembers it now save a few scholars?"

Rozala almost shivered, though the afternoon heat was stifling even in the shade.

"But we've lost wars, haven't we?" she softly asked. "In the years since. And it did not destroy us like it did the Osuna."

"Because we did not flee, my darling," Mother smiled. "We abjure nothing, we Malanzas. When the sun dims, when hard ends find us, we embrace the dark. We survive, whatever the cost, and through peril-"

"Rise," Rozala finished in whisper.

"Juan Osuna fled east and ever returned, Rozala," Mother said. "He might have won, had he fought. Had he had the *stomach* for the fight."

Instead, Rozala thought, all that was left of the man was a half-forgotten lie. It was the first lesson her mother ever taught her.

She did not forget it.

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IV

Cordelia Hasenbach had been crowned First Prince of Procer but there were some who argued, and not without reason, that it was Prince Amadis Milenan of Iserre who had won the Great War. What else could it be called but a victory, when without his lands having ever known war a man rose to become one of the great powers of the land? Prince Amadis did not hold the highest office in the Principate, but he had not beggared himself and his allies to seize it as the First Prince had. And down here, in the south, old blood knew the strength of patience. The Lycaonese despot would fall sooner or later, and when she did the Prince of Iserre would rise in her stead.

Rozala Malanza, made Princess of Aequitan by her mother's decree before she drank the regal mercy, had heard much of this sort of talk in Salia. Not in the streets, of course, for the people were jubilant at the election of a First Prince and the end of the Great War, but behind the doors of great mansions in the city. Rozala had remained aloof, even when invited to attend dinners, preferring to study the currents at the capital from a distance. Hasenbach was not as weak as was argued, she saw, and there was wishful thinking clouding the judgements. She had the votes in the Highest Assembly, and the bite of her armies would not be soon forgot. For now, she had the run of the Principate.

And she was comfortable enough in her seat to make gestures, such as refraining from contesting Rozala's acclamation as princess

before the Highest Assembly. It was tradition, when a princess of the blood took the regal mercy, that their choice of successor not be challenged. Yet tradition was only that, not law, and Hasenbach had the strength to dispense with it should she wish it.

It had burned Rozala like acid, kneeling on the floor of the Highest Assembly as she faced the cold-eyed savage that'd made her mother drink poison. The hate clung at her insides like a thousand hooks, and these days fear was beginning to do the same. For Hasenbach had been merciful, yes – wasn't it the talk of city, the virtue and kindness of their fresh young ruler? – but she had not been *soft*. Rozala wore a crown but her young brother Hernan, the same little shit who'd tattled on her as a boy and tried to steal her throne as a man, was now a member of the First Prince's court in Salia.

Tread carefully, Cordelia Hasenbach's cool blue eyes had told Rozala as she knelt. *Tread carefully, or else.*

Yet she could not. Gods, how could she? Mother was dead and now the savage had put a knife at her throat. She would not be called to heel like a dog, browbeaten into obedience. Yet the House of Malanza had few friends, these days, for it had come close to the throne but in the end it had *lost*. No one wanted to share the taint by association, not even those who had been her mother's most ardent supporters. And so Princess Rozala Malanza at last accepted an invitation to taste the latest Iserran vintages, finding herself seated across Prince Amadis Milenan. A handsome man, the Prince of Iserre, and well-spoken.

"I'd despaired of ever having the pleasure of your company, Your Grace," Prince Amadis smiled, pouring her a second cup with a steady hand and offering it. "Yet I suppose allowances must be made for grief."

Allowances, he had said. The chosen word was not happenstance. There was only one master in the alliance that Amadis Milenan was gathering under his banner, and he would not suffer any talk to the contrary. His protection, his help, would come at a price. It ate at Rozala's pride, and she almost turned back, but she could not. Rozala Malanza would not go into exile, abjure the death of her mother and the answer it must be given. *She had the stomach for this fight.* And so she smiled, thanked the prince for his courtesy and took the cup she had been offered.

Through peril, rise, Rozala swore, and drank deep.

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II

The First Prince died and the Highest Assembly gave answer. Too many answers, in truth, and there lay the tragedy: seven growingly urgent sessions were held, and even at the end of the seventh no one had the votes to sit the high throne.

Princess Constance of Aisne – no true princess, not even born to the House of Groseiller but to a branch family of a different name – claimed regency and rule of Salia until a First Prince could be elected, claiming it her right under ancient laws as the closest kin to the buried First Prince. Rozala's mother laughed and walked out of the Hall of Assembly without another word, Dagobert of Lange and Fabien of Lyonis not far behind her. It would be war, then. Regretful, Rozala's mother said, but it'd all be settled in a few years after battles separated the serious contenders from the chaff and compromises were forced.

The people bled. The people sang, growing quiet when riders neared. It was a new song, but in a sense it was also as old as the Principate.

Princess said she had a right, it went.

Princess said it'd be a fight

Now princess are all aflight,

And the pot it is boiling.

Rozala Malanza learned war in the saddle as a girl barely grown, taking lesson from fantassin captains and highborn generals as she wore mail and rode under the banner of the House of Malanza. She took her first life at fourteen and Mother's smile when she returned bloodied was luminous.

"You will be what I cannot," Aenor of Aequitan said, stroking her hair. "I am no warrior, it is not in my nature, but you are taking splendidly to it."

One day mother would rule in Salia, Rozala at her side, and bookish Hernan would be made steward of Aequitan as Rozala herself was schooled to ensure the dawn of a Malanza dynasty on the high throne. But it was a golden dream, and the Gods ever laughed at such designs. First defeats in the east, as Constance the Usurper drove back an offensive into Orne at the Battle of the Swallows. It stung, but the war continued. And when the first of the Great Claimants was smashed up north, Fabien of Lyonis kneeling to another's rights, the armies of Aequitan and its allies marched north to prevent Dagobert of Lange from consolidating power.

The Sack of Lullefeuille decimated Aequitan's army, cunning Prince Dagobert and his Goethal right hand penning it up in the city and smashing it piecemeal. Rozala broke the encirclement,

leading out a few thousand haggard survivors, but it was an unmitigated disaster. Yet Aenor of Aquitan's tongue was silver, and her treasury overflowing even in defeat, so armies were raised again. The war was not over. When word came of the savage Lycaonese sallying south, it was considered an amusing anecdote. Then Brus fell. Then Lange surrendered, as Segovia and Lyonis knelt.

The anecdotes were no longer amused.

It still shook Rozala to the bone, when she saw that Mother was entertaining envoys from Constance the Usurper. Secretly, but the wind was turning and alliance was in the air. Only for so long, but this Cordelia Hasenbach – who most of Procer had barely heard of a year ago, back then know only for the fanciful tales of Praesi manipulation she'd sent letters about – was scaring the opposition. The Great War was entering its last stretch, and neither Aenor Malanza nor Constance Groseiller had broken a dozen armies to end up allowing some slip of a girl from the edge of the world to claim the high throne in their stead.

"It will be done, my darling," Mother told her one night. "The alliance is agreed upon, all that is left is haggling terms."

"I had twenty cousins when this war began, Mother," Rozala harshly replied. "I now have three."

And these only because even Constance the Usurper would not blacken her name by having toddlers and newborn babes murdered.

"You would break bread with the woman who ordered this?" Rozala asked. "Share a cause with her?"

The very thought was enough to make her sick.

"I have not forgotten a single thing, Rozala," Princess Aenor harshly replied. "But I am a princess, not a swaggering duellist: there are times when honour must be set aside. When the deaths are blindly dealt and so pride must be swallowed. Sometimes we make bargains with those we hate, when duty demands it of us."

—

V

Weeping Gods, but it had all gone wrong.

The Army of Callow should have been in no state to fight after the bruising clashes of the previous day, but Rozala's belated suspicions had proved true: even as the dead rose from the water, hammering home the gravity of her mistake, the legionaries of the Black Queen had struck. Where the day before had been a dance of manoeuvres and daring, and the day before it a terrifying battle

of Chosen and Damned, this one was nothing so clean. It was a blind melee, vicious and messy and chaotic. Exhausted and bloodied by the days of fighting, the Army of Callow and the crusaders went at each other like ragged dogs.

And silently, eerily, the blue-eyed dead kept coming in waves.

The Chosen had gone out into the waters to fight the Black Queen: ice raged in the swamp as spurts of sorcery lit up the morning sky and screams echoed from afar. Rozala would pray for their victory, but not count on it. The battle did not grow any less nasty as the hours stretched, she found, for while a desperate defence was mounted by the soldiers from Orne and the enemy kept from sweeping the camp, the Army of Callow settled into a brutal slugging match with the crusaders – a slugging match Rozala could already see would turn in favour of the enemy eventually, for the dead were coming by the water and the lines holding the shore slowly buckling.

Thrice she traded a charge with the Order of the Broken Bells, hoping her more numerous horse would shatter the enemy's knights and allow her to strike the flanks, but the Callowan knights were hardy and unflinching. She was forced to withdraw when the left flank of her shield wall, too close to the swamp, began to collapse and rout. Rozala rode there in haste and brought fantassin reinforcements, but all it did was restore the stalemate: her attempt at a push into the enemy's lines was swiftly answered with goblin munitions and heavy foot. Not long after some of the Chosen return to her side, the Pilgrim and the Saint foremost among them, while others went to bolster the army.

It gave the men spine, Rozala saw, but it wouldn't win the battle.

"Where is the Black Queen?" the Princess of Aquitan urgently asked, shouting over the sounds of battle.

If she was dead, then this could still be turned around. But before the Peregrine could say a word, a shape was glimpsed riding a winged horse above them and Rozala got her answer. The Enemy approached on graceful wings, bringing death with her, and the heroes at Rozala's side readied for the fight. Legends, both of them, and still they looked grim. Yet when the Black Queen threw herself down into a hard landing, it was not to fight.

"Truce," Catherine Foundling claimed. "I'm here to talk."

And the heroes hemmed and hawed over this, over continuing the fight even under truce flag, but all Rozala could think of was that there would be no winner today. In this brutal mess of mud and blood, no one would *win*. No matter who claimed mastery of the field at the end of the day, both armies would be broken. And so, when the Chosen spoke pretty words to talk themselves into the

killing, Rozala listened to an older voice speaking older words. She was a princess, not a swaggering duellist.

"Stop," Princess Rozala Malanza ordered, and took off her helmet.

It was a monster she was facing now, one it disgusted her to think she might strike a bargain with, but the Princess of Aequitan had a duty.

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III

The Great War ended on the fields of Aisne, not in the thunderous clash of arms but in the quiet hours that followed the end of the battle.

Unerring, eerily precise, Cordelia Hasenbach's riders had found the princes and princesses fleeing the catastrophic defeat. Rozala took dark amusement in the way that Contance of Aisne and her party had been seized before the Malanzas were. The House of Malanzamight not have won the war, but at least it could be said that their claim had outlasted that of their most hated rivals. The few months that followed were spent in comfortable but thorough captivity as Cordelia Hasenbach herself journeyed down from Rhenia to formally accept the surrender of her captives and the acclamation of her allies.

Mother's attempts to get messages out without the knowledge of their captors had resulted only in two servants hanged and their party being stripped of ink and parchment, the Iron Prince not even bothering to tell them in person before giving the orders. The Lycaonese were living up to their rough reputation. Though Rozala insisted, screamed and then even begged, Mother refused to allow her to sit in on the conversation with Prince Cordelia – who was not yet First Prince, for all her high-handedness. Aenor of Aequitan was subdued when she returned, sapped of her usual boundless spirit.

The Princess of Aequitan formally surrendered the morning after and sent orders to her *assermenté* in Salia to vote in favour of Cordelia Hasenbach's candidature to the high throne. After making a few public oaths, she was allowed to return with Aequitan with her household, no 'escort' accompanying her or ransoms being demanded. Rozala found herself quite startled. These were very lenient terms of surrender Prince Cordelia had accepted, unlike what the Malanzas would have demanded were the positions reversed. The heiress to Aequitan found she rather admired the Lycaonese for her restraint, her mercy.

That last word turned to ash on her, when they returned home and the real terms of surrender were unveiled. Aenor of Aequitan

would drink poison, recalled early to the feet of the Heavens. The *regal mercy*, some called it.

Rozala boiled out with rage. She tried to raise the palace to war again, but the halls with empty with the losses of too many defeats and the eyes of the commanders gone gloomy. There was no stomach left for the fight in Aequitan. And still Rozala raged, for what else could she do? But the march forward of fate was inexorable, and Mother now seemed so... tired. Rozala did not refuse the summons when they came and the servants led her to the ancient throne room of Aequitan. Mother sat the throne, a cup of wine in hand.

"You will have to be wary of your brother," Aenor Malanza said. "He was raised to rule Aequitan for you as you followed me to Salia. That power is not a prize easily relinquished."

Rozala nodded, mute from the grief that had snared her throat.

"It was the price for rule of Aequitan staying with our line instead of passing to a lesser branch, my darling," Mother gently said. "And perhaps it is better this way."

"There is nothing *better* in this," the hard-eyed daughter replied.

"There are deeds, days that demand an answer, Rozala," the Princess of Aequitan said. "The Ebb and the Flow rule us all, but sometimes... sometimes there are higher callings. Listen to them, my darling. Heed them, and in time you will live up to what I see in you now."

"Mother," Rozala begged, tears in her eyes, "there must be another way."

Her mother stroked her hand gently.

"Through peril, rise," Aenor of Aequitan whispered. "Go, Rozala. While I still have the strength."

Aenor of Aquitan took the poison exactly a day after Constance of Aisne was made to do the same. And with that cruellest of mercies, the last defeated claimant to have fought in the Great War died. An era had come to an end. *Long live First Prince Cordelia*, the people shouted in the streets. Rozala thought of the sound the doors of the throne room had made closing, and polished her sword.

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VI

Princess Rozala Malanza stood as the only princess, the only royalty of her people, in all of Iserre.

This night, this graveyard of princes, had been a madness beyond what the Ebb and the Flow could frame in understanding. Legends had died who'd been legends for longer than Rozala had been alive. Angels had touched the world, the Dead King been forced to stay his hand and some magnificent eldritch realm had been born of trickery and sacrifice. And of all the western crowns that had sat brows when steel was first bared, only hers remained. Handed back to her by the Black Queen, terrifying praise from a terrifying foe.

Rozala Malanza alone of seven did not flinch, when sacrifice was asked, the Arch-heretic of the East had said, eyes hard and judging. For that, she keeps her crown.

It had been a grand gesture, the Princess of Aquitan thought. One made for honour, not advantage, for there were other crowns that would have been more useful for Catherine Foundling to preserve. So when in the wake of the gesture Rozala's own kind had begun to squabble like dogs worrying a bone over how the given grace could be traded and twisted, she'd felt something deeper than disappointment course through her veins. It'd been like scales lifted from her eyes.

She saw the contempt in the eyes of the Chosen, the way the Tyrant of Helike grinned at them all with something akin to fondness. Gods, but how petty they must all seem to those eyes. Arrayed against the Principate were Theodosius the Unconquered's mad get and the greatest warlord of their age, how was *this* the best to be mustered against them? Even their allies were led by the likes of the Peregrine, royal blood hallowed by angels. Procer had been challenged to meet the hour of doom thrust upon it, to match the calibre of the great men and women standing with and against the realm.

And Rozala Malanza saw, in the eyes of those same people, that Procer had failed to meet the challenge.

It burned that she could not deny it. Even as the hour grew late and the Black Queen played them all for fools one last time, bringing back alive a dead man. Even as the great lords of Levant swore oaths atop the hill, straight-backed and solemn.

"Let it be remembered," the Grey Pilgrim said, shining bright with pride, "that when the Enemy came for the world, Levant did not shirk its duty."

Rozala grieved the sight, for what had Procer done to warrant such friendship? Nothing and less. It burned still, that feeling she could now name as *shame*. Because she knew the honour of tonight might be betrayed in years to come. That her people might live up to the worst of themselves instead of the best. Was that not the nature of the Ebb and Flow? *So I beg you, Merciful Gods, could we not rise above ourselves? Even if only one, just once.*

But the Heavens did not answer any more than they had when she'd been but a girl stewing in grief and rage. Silence. But there were days, deeds that demanded an answer.

And if the Gods would not give it, then she would. So Rozala's fingers closed around the hilt of the same sword she'd once polished, dreaming of how it would cut through Cordelia Hasenbach's neck.

Princess Rozala Malanza bared her blade and heeded a higher calling.

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VII

Once she'd marched on Trifelin and suffered a stinging defeat.

The second time she'd marched there, she'd eked out a bloody victory.

Now the Princess of Aquitan watched the endless spread of the dead marching against *her*, a shambling tide of steel and darkness. Slowly she unsheathed her sword and raised it, thousands answering her with glittering steel and torches.

"Through peril," Rozala Malanza screamed.

"*Rise*," the people screamed back.

She had been a slow learner, in many ways, but Rozala had never ceased to learn. And the third battle of Trifelin would be hers body and soul, this she swore.

One day she would teach her daughter about it.

Disjunction

"Hate, earnest hate, requires understanding of yourself and your enemy. Anyone can despise a scarecrow of their own making, but to truly loathe another you must first recognize in them some part of yourself that you deeply detest."

— Extract from 'The Covenant of Iron', a philosophical text by Dread Empress Foul II

People were already calling it the Peace of Salia.

The capital letter rolled off the tongue, as if the Gods themselves had designated this particular to be more momentous than old ones. Now the Principate's capital was celebrating that peace with great enthusiasm, for a city that'd been aflame not a

month ago. The streets had been adorned with flowers and streaming banners, tables brought out from houses and taverns and shops as the people gathered under torchlight. Simple but plentiful foodstuffs – paid for by the First Prince, under her title of Princess of Salia – had been freely distributed, and everywhere cellars doors were cracked open and a few choice bottles produced. It was as if the capital had turned into a massive summer fair.

The Peace had been a balm for the Principate's soul, one direly needed for these days Procer was feeling rather more fragile than it was used to. For the greatest empire on the surface of Calernia, that was a shock difficult to swallow. Unlike her own people, it had been centuries since the Procerans had been made to look the possibility of annihilation in the eye – save for the Lycaonese, of course, though that people had never hid their disgust for the behaviour of their southern kin. For now the fear had made honest folk of these princes and princesses, but the heiress knew better than to expect that would last. The fear would fade with time, and when it did the scheming would begin again.

When it did she would be ready. Part of that, unfortunately, meant doing violence against her own patience.

Vivienne would have preferred taking to the streets with the commons, but as the heiress-designate to the throne of Callow her absence at the ball would have been very much noticed. Catherine's clever, bloody gift from the Princes' Graveyard carried few privileges that Vivienne Dartwick had not already possessed, and brought with it many, many duties. In a twisted way, it was why Vivienne considered it a gift at all: her queen, her friend, only ever thrust such heavy burdens onto those she trusted. The warmth of that trust still lingered and made the evening slightly more tolerable than it would otherwise had been.

Still, even so spending a few hours surrounded by drunk Blood and the cream of Proceran nobility wasn't exactly Vivienne's idea of a pleasant evening. Cordelia Hasenbach could throw a party, mind you. The food and décor made up for the chore to some extent, since if she was to dirty her hands smiling at fools at least it would be in beautiful surroundings. *Le Palais Joyeux*, this place was called, which if she remembered her Chantant well meant 'the Joyous Palace'. Unlike most kinds of Proceran ostentation, which the baron's daughter in her could not help but find garish and vulgar, she could not help but find this particular indulgence striking.

Save for the great marble pavilion at the heart of the palace, the grounds were entirely a great open-air garden. Terraces and gazebos provided islets of food and drink, but the talking and even the dancing was done on the grassy green. Topiaries and

sculpted flower beds – prizing pale and purple blooms above all – sprawled out in loose rings emanating from the great pavilion, occasionally revealing bronze statues whose rust has been artfully and carefully managed. Lanterns hung from great ropes above, cast warm light, and enchanted motes of light drifted across the night like little stars. It was quite the enchanting sight, and for all their many flaws the western nobles had come out just as beautifully adorned.

Fortunes had been spent on brocade doublets for the men, as they were the current fashion in Salia, while the women favoured instead layered dresses with split skirts and long stockings. Powders and cosmetics were used to accentuate beauty, for few here were ugly. Visibly so, at least, for though Procerans nobility publicly held distaste for mages it was quite eager to use their sorceries on matters like appearance in private. Still, for all their splendour the Procerans were not the centre of attraction: it had been a very long time since either Blood or Callowan highborn had visited Salia, and so both were treated as something between prey and honoured guests.

“- it was added at the order of First Princess Armande Rohanon, in truth, who it is said was very fond of *le Palais Joyeux*,” Simon de Gorgeault finished.

Armande Rohanon, Vivienne dimly remembered, had been the last ruler of Procer before the one whose death had begun what the westerners called the Great War. The last of the three from the House of Rohanon to have claimed the high throne in row, explaining the line’s sharp descent in fortunes since – since the death of the last Merovins, the princes of Procer had not been inclined to allow another house among them to rise too high again. Vivienne’s eyes moved away from the statue she’d inquired about, a piece allegedly meant to represent Clothor Merovins but carved in a style so severe it was nearly Callowan. It was why she’d asked about it in the first place.

“I have never known a man to have even half as many statues as the Principate’s founder,” Vivienne dryly noted. “They would make a forest of their own, put together.”

“Procer is the youngest of the great realms in some ways,” the lay brother smiled. “Even the Dominion can claim descent from the Eighteen Cities, after all, while no single predecessor state ever occupied more than third of our lands. Our shorter history has accrued much gilding to offset that... insecurity.”

He really was good, Vivienne thought. Simon de Gorgeault, whose company she much preferred to younger men incapable of understanding she had no interest in a flirtation, was at first glance at an attractive older man with a pleasant speaking voice and interesting conversation. He was also one of the three highest-ranking spymasters in Procer, though his Holy Society was

more diplomatic in nature than its rival Silver Letters and Circle of Thorns. He'd also emerged from the botched attempt to remove Cordelia Hasenbach from the throne as a very influential man high in the First Prince's trust, on account of the red-handed loyalty he'd displayed to her during those mad hours.

He was charming enough it was easy to forget he was here to take her measure and report every word and nuance to Cordelia Hasenbach.

"Not a word I would have associated with your people until tonight," Vivienne mildly replied, "but I thank you for the insight."

The silver-haired man looked faintly amused.

"You don't trust us at all, do you Lady Dartwick?" Simon de Gorgeault asked.

Vivienne smiled pleasantly, knowing it would not reach her eyes. *I trust your rapacious pack of fellows not a whit, spymaster, she thought. I haven't forgotten that even begging was not enough to stay your hand, when you thought you were winning.* There was a greater war than any mortal squabble waiting up north, but she would not let that delude her as to the nature of the empire she was clasping hands with. Its only saving grace, as far as she was concerned, was that it was not as prone to doomsday horrors as the one laying to the east of Callow.

"Trust is much like this grand garden, Brother Simon," she calmly replied. "Years in the making, even when carefully tended to."

It was a diplomat's answer, but then they were both diplomats of some stripe. The man excused himself with a bow, sensing the conversation was at an end, and Vivienne took to the garden paths again. Catherine was easy enough to find, considering there was never anything less than a crowd around her. Her victories on the field followed by a sudden turn allying with Procer would have made her fascinating to this lot even if she'd not been wildly charismatic – and, in small doses anyway, that she was 'Damned' only leant a scandalous appeal to her company. With a bottle of wine in her and Hakram at her side, though, Cat would be able to handle it.

The wave of laughter that passed through the assembled crowd of Proceran hanger-ons and Blood in her pavilion suggested that the Queen of Callow might have dusted off a story perhaps best left buried, but then that wouldn't be the first time. And Vivienne was inclined to bet that it'd been a calculated move if she had.

Catherine Foundling had been eerily prescient since joining the fray in Iserre, and measured in a way she'd not been before. The Everdark had changed her, and perhaps everyone else who'd gone

down there with here. Indrani's changes were perhaps more subtle in nature, but nothing to be sneered at either. Vivienne had once doubted anything of what lay between her and Masego would be voiced before the Last Dusk, but even if she'd not been the mistress of the Jacks she would have noticed the changes slowly taking place there. Though Vivienne was not certain Zeze had it in him to offer what Indrani wanted of him, she wished them well in the attempt.

It seemed to make them both happy, which settled the matter as far as she was concerned.

Vivienne knew her station had obligations, and that it was important to forge ties now so that she might have existing relations with the princes to the west of Callow in years to come, but at the moment she'd had as much of this as she could stomach. She'd been a thief long before she'd been the Thief, so it wasn't too difficult to slip into an elegant hedge maze and shake off her few 'pursuers' – nobles a little too eager to speak with her, or a little too drunk to realized she was not interested in flirting with bloody Procerans. The maze wasn't too difficult to figure out, as though the walls were tall there were towers and bridges to orient herself with. Twice Vivienne kept to the shadows as she passed couples a lot more interested in each other than their surroundings, which gave a good hint as to what all these alcoves maze might actually be meant for.

She'd skimmed the edge of the labyrinth while allowing herself time to breathe, so eventually Vivienne was forced to admit that duty beckoned once more. There was only so long she could allow herself to disappear for. From what she recalled glimpsing from one of the higher tiers of the garden, one of the several way outs of the maze should be not too far ahead. When grassy grounds gave way to small tiles – checkered black and white, an unusually simple pattern by Proceran standards – she knew she was on the right track, as the tiles were surrounding a small fountain of silver and marble. Vivienne's steps stuttered, however, when she saw who was waiting by the edge of the fountain.

The shade sat by the water, trailing gloved fingers against the surface as she sat artfully arranged on the chequered stone. The long wrap dress she wore was more Praesi than her usual fare – the vivid patterns of red, yellow and blue drew the eye to the slim waist and the red sash below it, tumbling down into a large patterned red skirt. Matching elbow-length gloves and veil coming down an elaborately tied head wrap finished the ensemble. Akua Sahelian was an eastern dream, tucked away in a hidden corner of a western court. Vivienne felt her fingers twitch, wishing for a knife.

"They'll really let *anybody* in, these days," Vivienne drawled.

The shade turned eerie golden eyes to her – a shade unnatural, that no mortal should have – and offered a charming smile under the gauzy veil.

“Lady Dartwick,” Akua pleasantly said. “What a fortunate happenstance.”

“It’s neither,” she replied. “What do you want, Sahelian?”

“Why, can I not simply seek the simple pleasure of conversation with a peer?” the shade asked.

“I’ve yet to see another snake in the garden,” Vivienne coldly replied, “but should that change, I’ll be sure to send it your way.”

And yet she did not move to leave. Not because she enjoyed insulting the other woman, although she did, but because she very much doubted that Sahelian’s presence here was without purpose. Vivienne would not take off before having first learned it – or, should the opportunity appear, frustrate it instead.

“I thought we might reach an accord,” Akua Sahelian lightly said. “If not for each other’s sake, then for what it might cost others for us to remain at odds.”

Vivienne laughed. It was sharp and immediate, withholding no barbed bite in its utter scorn.

“It’s a clumsy game you’re playing,” she replied. “You’ll not muzzle me through Catherine, Sahelian. If my gaze burns when she enjoys you, it is because she knows it *should*.”

Not that the dark-skinned shade could understand that. It wasn’t the Wasteland way for the empress to suffer judgement from one she ruled, and Akua Sahelian remained the Wasteland’s creature beyond even the calls of flesh and blood. Vivienne watched the golden eyes, saw how the skin tightened around them as the – heiress, the diabolist, the – shade mastered her irritation. As always, the thief itched to peel back that control layer by layer until irk turned to anger and the garter snake at last revealed its viper’s fangs. The shade smiled, fingers coming down across her long veil and unmaking it in wisps wherever they touched.

The bare face left behind was lovely, but it was a poisonous sort of loveliness. Not the kind that Vivienne would ever find herself envying in another woman.

“I’ve always wondered at the hate you keep for me, Vivienne Dartwick,” Akua mused. “You claim it a matter of principle, earned by my folly, but I know what personal tastes like.”

The smile broadened almost mockingly.

"And this, my dear lady, positively *reeks* of the intimate," the golden-eyed shade said, her voice smooth as silk.

"That so," Vivienne said, unimpressed. "Well spotted. Putting that expensive noble upbringing to good use, you are."

"Your compliments mean the world to me," Akua assured her, tone without the faintest trace of irony. "After all we've had such entertaining talks, you and I."

What was it she was after? Going round and round in meaningless spars would accomplish nothing but wasting the time of the both of them. The dark-haired heiress saw no need to step lightly, though, which simplified things.

"What do you want, Sahelian?" Vivienne repeated. "And try a drop of honesty, this time – I know it doesn't come naturally, but you ought to be able to fake it convincingly by now."

"I have always been honest with my desires, if not how I intend to seize them," the shade easily replied. "Is it so unbelievable I would seek at least a truce between us, even if peace is beyond our reach?"

Vivienne's eyes narrowed. True, she figured, or close enough.

"A truce," the dark-haired Callowan slowly said.

"I understand that there is bad blood between us," Akua calmly said. "I would have it set aside, at least for the time being. And so I wondered how I might make redress, but found answers eluded me. Who then to ask but the woman herself?"

She shrugged, languid, and for a heartbeat Vivienne grasped why Catherine's eyes so often strayed in that one's direction. She was utterly disinterested in the fairer sex, herself, but even so the fluidity of the movement had caught her eye. There was more to seduction than sex or showing skin.

"You remind me of a girl I used to know in Southpool," Vivienne smiled. "She, too, somehow came under the impression that when she threw coin at trouble she'd cause it made up for the act."

"I offered no such thing," the shade said, tone grown sharper.

Offended that Wasteland pride, had she? She'd get over it. Or not. Hardly her problem either way.

"A bribe's a bribe," Vivienne flatly dismissed. "You want to know what it'll cost you to buy civility between us, let's not pretend this is anything more."

"Ah," Akua hummed, voice melodious, "but let me ask you this – if it *had* been, would you have cared?"

"No," Vivienne replied, bluntly and immediately.

That took the other woman aback, though she hid it well.

"There's nothing you can do to dig your way back to daylight after the Folly, as far as I'm concerned," the heiress to Callow said.

Elegantly, the shade rose to her feet. She took a step to the side, light, and Vivienne matched her the other way.

"There must be some bare measure of courtesy offered and received," Akua said. "Else all we do is darken our standing in our queen's eyes."

Vivienne smiled, a cold slice of pale teeth bared.

"I used to be afraid that you'd edge me out of the Woe," she idly said, watching the other woman's attention sharpen. "That you'd slither your way into their affections and then steal my place among them."

"No longer?" Akua asked, just as idly.

"It was weakness," Vivienne said. "I didn't trust myself, didn't trust them. I should have known better."

It'd taken Hakram carving through his own hand to yank her out of the downwards spiral, but he had. And now she was no longer afraid of shadows she'd painted in the corners with her own hands.

"Heartwarming," Akua said. "Perhaps you might, then, from the depths of-"

"You haven't slept with her," Vivienne suddenly said. "You wouldn't be..."

This afraid, she didn't say, *this insecure, if you'd shared a bed*. The shade leaned forward, eyes mocking. But the mockery was brittle, the heiress decided.

"Would you have been jealous, if I had?" Akua asked, tone suggestive. "It must have been flattering, all those lingering looks. Even if you weren't interested. And it must have stung when they ceased."

She could have lied, or refused to answer, but why bother? The truth would not hurt her, not here. There was nothing about that relationship she was ashamed of, and she felt more certain of it than she ever had before. Catherine had entrusted her with *Callow*. Merciful Gods, what could any words or doubts possibly mean in the face of that?

"I missed it, at first," Vivienne shrugged. "But even when I still did, never as much as I enjoyed our relationship being simplified."

Catherine had never made advances and Vivienne never refused them, but the attraction had not been hidden either. It'd been a relief when it had faded as she'd figured it would, freeing her from being unable to return the feelings of someone she cared deeply for in other ways. It'd never been love, anyhow, just a passing torch. And while it had never been unpleasant, or made her feel pressed, she was glad the complication was gone.

"You want it to be a loss, something you took," Vivienne continued. "But there was nothing there to lose. We are not in *competition*, Akua Sahelian."

"You asked an oath for the end of my existence," the shade replied. "We very much are, though you might prefer to pretend otherwise: you never were much good with a knife in hand, were you? That sort of work was always best left to others."

A comment that would have drawn blood, a year ago. No longer.

"What I had to say on the matter of your fate, I have said," Vivienne said. "It's out of my hands, now, and entirely in hers."

She was surprised to find she meant it. She'd spent most her life trying to take from Praesi to make for what they took, trying to get even with hard words and grasping hands. But she'd left that life behind, she really had. Her Name would not have left her otherwise. Tormenting Akua Sahelian, taking vengeance on her, wouldn't make her home better. And she was, in that moment, glad that the long price there was not hers to take. Because it would be a burden, a vengeance of that magnitude. A crushing gone.

"You're not my rival, Akua," Vivienne said. "You're not even my enemy, not really. You're just someone else's charge, until you get what's coming to you."

She almost laughed, feeling oddly uplifted by it all. It was matched only by the fury she saw on the face of the woman she'd dismissed. *And it's working*, she thought, watching those troubled golden eyes. *Whatever it is Catherine's doing to you. Else you would not have come here tonight, unsure why you did. She's turned you all upside down. And that might have given you a hold on her, because this is a two-way street, but if the emotions are genuine she'll always win. Because she can kill her own heart, if she needs to, and you don't even know what yours is.*

"And once again, your pretty pale fingers stay clean," Akua Sahelian said, eyes hard. "What a comfort it must be, to have always had others to bleed and be bled for you."

"You're going to cost her things she loves," Vivienne quietly replied, ignoring the slight. "Respect she took years to earn, trust she's still not entirely sure she deserves. You'll cost her Callow, too, in some ways. She'll stand by you anyways."

"Why?" the dark-skinned woman asked.

It was, Vivienne thought, the rawest she'd ever seen Akua Sahelian. The eagerness, the desperation, the dread: they'd all had a piece of that one word, like hounds gnawing at the same bone.

"I don't know," Vivienne softly laughed. "It is not my price to exact, however long the taking. And why would I tell you, Doom of Liesse, even if I knew?"

The shade's smiled turned rueful, her face mastered once more. The mask had returned and it still fit, however cracked it might have gotten.

"I could have every Choir and every Fairfax from Eleonor to Robert singing of my redemption before you," Akua said, "and you would still not care a whit, would you? You do not believe the scales can move."

"It's not something you can learn, Sahelian," Vivienne said. "It's not a trick or a spell, to become more than the sum of what they made you. You're trying to stay the same and be loved, hoping charms and favours will get you there, but that's not how this works."

She shrugged.

"You have to genuinely want it," Vivienne said. "To do good, even if it does nothing for you. And for all your brilliance and your poisonous cleverness, Akua, at the end of the day I just don't believe you have it in you."

"You know precious little of me, Vivienne Dartwick," the golden-eyed woman replied.

Her face had gone blank, like a mask of clay.

"Prove me wrong, then," Vivienne smiled.

And she had, at last, what she came for. So Vivienne left, whistling a jaunty tune, and returned to the evening awaiting her. Behind her reigned only silence, though an even more careful ear would have heard a faint sound. A step.

Like the first step going up a hill.

Colossal I

"You who name yourselves Titans desecrate what the word once meant. You make yourselves petty tyrants over children and break bones for hollow works, greedy as the wyrms we overthrew. Are you not ashamed at what we are become?"

– Antigone Strides-Ever-Unyielding, amphore for the Chorus of the Gentle Hand

She was cold.

It had been the howls in the distance she'd feared enough to run deeper into the woods, through thick brush in places where no moonlight reached, but now it was the cold that threatened to swallow her whole. She was shivering, shaking, and twice now she'd tripped on a root. Her knees were skinned and her arms bruised. The child had gotten lost in the dark, and the panic that followed that realization only made it worse. She ran back, branches raking her skin, but she did not know where back was anymore. She was tired and, sometimes she could hear things moving around her.

Monsters, creeping close. She fled those with all that was left of her strength, stumbling into a thornbush whose harsh bite set her weeping again as she crawled away and through the muck and leaves. Hands groping blindly she found a way up the fallen trunk blocking her way, hearing breaths coming ever closer to her, and when she reached the summit- *beautiful*, she thought. A clearing that was a perfect circle of green grass touched by pale moonlight, the silver painting tall stone slabs standing upright like silent sentinels.

She stumbled forward, onto the grass, and shivered under the cool wind. Holding herself with hands scraped raw, trying to keep what little warmth remained from leaving her, she tread across the soft grass and closer to the stones. The noises, the things in the woods, did not come closer. Was this a sacred place, one that would scare the creatures? Perhaps the Gods were safeguarding her. Hesitating but unwilling to stay out in the open, she went further in. The moonlight sliced in between the silhouettes, and as she approached for the span of a heartbeat she thought she saw a door.

There was nothing between the stones when she went there, though, only a play of light and shadows. Trembling, she extended a hand and gasped when it disappeared. It was as if she was going through a veil! And the air beyond was warmer. Biting her lip, she went through.

It was a room of stone, bare stone carved with strange symbols every which way. She'd come through a door, but immediately she knew this was not a refuge: there was something else inside, a hulking shape seated and breathing shallowly. Its eyes opened, each larger than her head, and she shrieked out in fear.

"Small-child," a deep voice said, a voice like a mountain would have if they could talk, "how did you come here?"

She knelt, her knees knocking.

"I'm sorry," she shivered, "it was an accident, I was cold and-"

She yelped in surprise when the hulking shape rose, revealing itself to look like a man. A giant. They ate children, she had been told. Ground their bones for flour and... a large palm settle gently atop her head, patting it.

"Do not fear," the giant said.

She mutely nodded.

"The Pattern does not know coincidence," the giant told her, tone thoughtful. "This was taught."

She didn't know how to reply, and the great one sighed.

"I must consider the portents," the giant said. "You may remain, small-child."

She stayed on her knees, trembling, as he bent down and passed through the veil into the night. It was a long time before the shakes ended, and longer still before she fell asleep.

—

She thought the giant would never come back, and wept bitterly not knowing whether this was a blessing or not.

The day passed in fits of tears as she huddled within the hidden altar, too afraid of what awaited in the woods to risk leaving. Warm sunlight passed through the veil, revealing strange symbols on the ground and shifting as the hours passed. Yet when dusk came and darkness spread over the land — the Gods Above had closed their eyes, her father had once told her, and the Gods Below stolen the sky in their slumber — soft, lumbering footsteps returned. As the stars shone down on the circle of stones and the altar hid within them, the giant returned.

His hair was long and dark, its face fiercely bearded but bearing gentle eyes and though its robes were pure white and long, dragging across the ground, there was not a speck of dirt on them. The giant bent down to peer at her, great eyes unblinking, and after sniffing her raised its hand. She choke on a scream of

fear, but no pain came: a gargantuan hand gently patted the top of her hair, ruffling her ratty hair.

"Small-child," the giant said. "I greet you."

She mumbled back a greeting of her own.

"Have you eaten?" the giant asked.

"No," she whispered.

"Then follow."

His back straightened and slowly it moved away. She hastily followed, taking care not to step on the trailing robes whose white knew no taint. She hesitated to pass the threshold, knowing what lay past it. The beautiful circle, but also cold. The creatures that prowled the night. Terror and dark and pain. A great palm settled on her head, as gentle eyes smiled at her.

"This is," the giant said, "a good place."

Eyes watering, she nodded and she followed. She gasped when she found that the air outside was not cold, as it had been the last night, but instead of a soft warmth.

"A good place," the giant repeated, "and it likes you."

It was beautiful, she thought. The stones dipped in silver moonlight, the soft green grass and the... perfection of it. Like the two halves were perfect mirrors, like the little clearing was a single whole and it was *complete*. The giant gently nudged her along, though he did not seem displeased by her staring, and the two of them went to the edge of the clearing. There shapes were moving in the underbrush and she shivered, hiding behind one of his great legs. A great muzzle peeked out, sniffing at the wind, and out of the dark came a wolf so large it could not be called a wolf. In its jaws, it bore something large and bloody.

It smelled of death.

She whimpered, but the giant was not troubled. He hummed three deep notes, and the world hummed along with him. The stones echoed of it, the sound rippling between them until it faded away. The great wolf bowed its head, placing on the ground what it had held in its mouth. A great stag, she saw in the moonlight, with antlers and hooves of glittering bronze. The giant bowed his head at the wolf, which raised its own and withdrew into the dark.

"The Pattern is a balance, small-child," the giant told her.

"This night, the she-wolf feeds us. One day we will return favour for favour."

She mutely nodded. The giant smiled.

"Good," he said. "We must pursue completion in all things, for a soul without balance weighs down all the world. This was taught."

She nodded again. The giant was pleased.

"Now, we eat."

The great stag was brought within the circle, where she sat as the giant reached atop one of the stones and took a bronze knife that had been hidden there. He skinned the stag as she watched, trying not to retch and backing away until she was resting against one of the stones. The stag was run on a spit of moonlight, made to hang in the air, and pale flames bloomed below it. The giant reached atop another stone and brought down a broad silver bowl, with water within. He drank deep if, the set it down before her. It smelled like rain.

"Drink," the giant said.

She did, and it was sweeter than any water she had ever drunk. She felt cleaner, even if she was still caked in filth, and her knees no longer hurt. It was a relief, the absence of pain almost like a pleasure. Suddenly tired, she leaned against the stone and felt her eyes begin to close. The warmth of the fire, the smell of the roasting stag, it was all lulling her to sleep. Almost smiling, she breathed out three notes. The last, faintly and to her surprise, echoed among the stones.

Utter stillness followed.

It only lasted for a heartbeat. After it passed, the giant began to turn the stag on the spit again. And the echo it'd died immediately, almost been snuffed out. Not at all like a real one. The giant finished the roast and cut her a large piece, which she dug into with relish, while he ate the rest until there little left but bones. When their bellies were full, he spoke again.

"Small-child," he said, "do you like this place?"

After a moment of consideration, she nodded. It was beautiful, and she was safe here. She almost asked a question, but bit her tongue. People did not like it when you asked questions.

"Ask," the giant gently said.

She bit her lip, then spoke up.

"What is it?" she mumbled. "This place?"

"A shrine," the giant said.

She nodded, for this was sensible. Gods must be honoured, or they would take away the day and let the land dry up.

"To what god?" she asked.

The giant laughed, a kind and rumbling thing that tasted not of mockery.

"To me," the giant said.

She looked at him with awe, for she had never seen a god before. The god considered her thoughtfully, stroking his beard.

"Would you like to stay here?"

A sob ripped its way out of her throat.

"Please," she pleaded. "I don't want to leave."

The giant-god patted her head again, gently.

"Then you will not," he said. "But you will not idle. I will give you tasks, and teachings. You will attend them."

She nodded. Anything, to avoid going back in the woods. The giant-god seemed pleased.

"Small-child," he said, "do you have a name?"

She shook her head.

"I had one," she said. "My father gave it. But the men with the cranes took it. They made us drink something and..."

Her heart seized. Nameless dread came upon her, even in this gentle place.

"Then I will give you one," the giant-god said.

Silence as the great being watched her. His eyes were piercing, at first, but then they softened with something like grief.

"Antigone," the giant said. "Your name will be Antigone, in honour of another. She who taught without ruling, disdaining the greed of titans and scorning the apathy of grief. Eighteen cities did she found, never once straying from the path she decided on."

Antigone shivered. The night was still warm, but somehow she'd felt cold creep up her spine. The god, though, was looking up at the sky.

"You look sad," she quietly said.

"I am," the god said.

"Do you miss her?" she asked.

The god smiled softly, eyes on the stars.

"Every day."

—

"Show me," the god said.

Antigone stood with her hands linked behind her back, wearing the new woolen tunic she had been given. She'd never had new clothes before. It was grand gift, and she would not disappoint the god. Eyes on the symbols carved into the standing stone, she sang them in the order they were written. Each glimmered with moonlight as she awaked the letters, her pronunciation perfect until she tripped over ai-si-e, fumbling the last syllable, and the glimmer died. She bit her lip, ashamed.

"Try again," the god encouraged.

On the second try she got all eleven letters of what the god called the Shallow Reflection, and he was pleased. Together they read words from slates of stone, the giant explaining their meaning, and under the moonlight Antigone learned her lesson. Soon, the god said, she would know enough to read. When she was ready he would give her scrolls and she would be able to read them during the day. It would give her more to do, he said, than to keep the shrine clean and eat.

"I'll read all the words," Antigone ferociously promised.

He patted her head with what she thought might be affection. They had already eaten, taken from the pack that the god had brought and drunk from the silver bowl that rainwater filled. There were remains from the meal, enough for her to eat tomorrow during the day and not be hungry. It was a great luxury. And yet Antigone sat down and could not help but wiggle a bit, because after the lessons came her favourite part. The god looked at her, chuckling, and sat down as well.

"Where did we leave off, Antigone?"

"The great drakon sundered the land with its wrath, splitting the earth and making two shores with a great island between," Antigone excitedly said. "But Okeanos called forth the waters to rise and bind it, dragging it to the crushing depths where many songs were sung and the drakon was stripped of its power and made a petty beast."

"It was a great victory," the god agreed. "Yet many defeats had come before it, and the cities of the children knew great ruin. You see, the drakoi could not truly die until they had spent long

enough as beasts that the Pattern forgot their divinity, else even in death they would only rise anew with terrifying splendor.”

Even as he spoke the shimmered with mirages, Antigone’s eyes going wide as she saw a great winged dragon, its wings large as a city, slain by a great bolt of lightning. But the dragon came back in a great storm of flames, blighting the land around it.

“But the Titans had a plan,” Antigone said.

As it always did when she spoke the word, the mirage shifted. There were a lot of silhouettes in the background of the group of people shown, but there were fifteen in front that could be made out clearly. Some of theirs names she already knew – Okeanos, with the wild temper and the words of the sea, Kronia with her cold stare and deadly sickle – but it was always the same one she reached for with her fingers. Tall and beautiful, with long silver hair and a kind smile, Antigone’s namesake seemed close enough to touch. The mirage would disperse if she did, though, so she held back.

“Vainglorious fools that they were,” the god agreed, “they had a plan.”

He told her of the fall of the Mirror-City, that night, of how the last cries of the children there drew in the hungriest of the drakoi and they Titans fell upon it as it slept after having fed on the dying. How it struggled mightily, flattening hills into plains, and how as it was stripped of power its blood flew and the hunger sunk into the land itself. It was thrilling story, and Antigone listened to every word avidly. She’d grown sleepy by the end, though. Not so sleepy she forgot to ask this time, though.

“May I ask a question?” Antigone dutifully asked.

The god nodded, as he always did.

“When you show the Titans,” she said, “there’s always one whose faces I can’t make out. Like it’s in shadows. Who is it?”

The giant-god was silent, for a long moment.

“Kreios,” he finally said. “His name was Kreios.”

“Why don’t you show his face?” Antigone sleepily asked.

“Because he was the worst fool of them all,” the god said, and they spoke of it no more.

—

It changed when Antigone realized that when spoke, the world listened.

It wasn't the same as when the god did it. The stones did not sing for her the way they did for him, every word an echo and with the rights words those echoes turning into a melody that always made her weep when she heard it. But even when it was Antigone putting together the letters of the Shallow Reflection together into words, when she tied the together neatly and spoke them into the Pattern, there was... something. She could not feel what it was, could not see it the way she thought the god might under moonlight, but she knew it was there.

At first she thought perhaps she could figure it out if she just spoke words until she saw something, but Antigone hesitated. That felt wrong somehow. Like she'd be wasting a gift. The god always said that the Pattern was a balance. Wouldn't she make things crooked, if she just spoke all those words uselessly? No, she decided, she wouldn't do it. She wouldn't be wasteful. Instead Antigone sat in the grass and tried to find a worthy purpose. Something worth doing. Something that deserved to have a reflection in the Pattern.

And after thinking about it for days, Antigone found her answer. On the second night she had ever spent here, a she-wolf had gone hungry so that Antigone and the god could eat. A favour had been done unto her. So now it was her turn. Over more days she saved up food from the packs, going slightly hungry, choosing things that wouldn't go bad if they were left. If the god saw, he said nothing. When she had enough to make up for part of a great stag, Antigone put it together on a blanket and brought it to the edge of the circle. The woods were never silent, but neither did she hear something come. So Antigone knelt, and she waited.

It was long hours in the sun that passed, as sweat trickled down her brow and her legs ached, but still she knelt. There would be no sincerity, otherwise, and somehow she though that speaking words without meaning them would be a very grave mistake.

And as the sun began to slowly crawl downwards, at last the great she-wolf came.

She was taller than some of the trees, Antigone saw with awe. Her fur was thick and grey, kissed by scars and marks, and her eyes were of a deep yellow. The she-wolf watched her for a long moment, panting softly as she stood just before the edge of the clearing. Her breath was warm as it washed over the small girl who did not know her own age. The she-wolf licked her chops, expectant. Antigone slowly bowed forward, still kneeling.

"Thank you," she said.

Immediately she bit her lip. Not, it hadn't come out right. The world had not listened to the words. The she-wolf eyed her patiently. She thought of the letters, then, and fixed them in her mind. And though it hurt, she kept them there.

"Thank you," Antigone said, and the world heard.

A shiver went through the air, an expectation, and the she-wolf grinned with bloody fangs. To Antigone's utter surprise, the great wolf stepped into the clearing. Her paws touched the grass and Antigone froze in fear. The god was not here. She was alone with a great and hungry wolf, that somehow she thought she might have let in. And as the wolf opened her maw Antigone closed her eyes, body clenching together, but the pain did not come. Instead she wailed in discomfort as a great wet tongue licked her face. Antigone backed away, trying to wipe away some of the stinking drool, but there was too much for her hands to make a difference. She shot an aggrieved look at the great wolf, who only panted amusedly.

Adding insult to injury, the she-wolf then bumped her chidingly with her nose and whined, as if to reproach her this entire idea.

"I was returning favour for favour," Antigone sulkily told her.

The she-wolf considered that a moment, then leaned forward and pinned her down to lick her face again. Shrieking with laughter and disgust the girl tried to wriggle out, but it was only after the she-wolf decided sufficient cleaning had been inflicted that she was freed. Getting back on her feet, Antigone pulled close and tried to wipe herself clean against the fur. It was a vain hope that smudged dirt and leaves over her, and the she-wolf strolled away. Turning, though, the great wolf leaned close to the little girl's ear and breathed out.

Lykaia, Antigone heard, though the word had not been spoken.

"Is that your name?" she asked.

The she-wolf snorted, slinking away. She also, Antigone noted, took the food on the blanket in a single snap of her jaw. And back into the woods she went, leaving the girl standing bemused and stinking of drool.

—

The following morning, when Antigone went out from the shrine into the sunlight, there was a great wolf lying on the grass and waiting for her.

Colossal II

"Why should the world balk at returning what it cost us to break its chains? It is not tyranny to receive our due, only the achievement of balance. There can be no shame in this, only in allowing empty charity to stand in the way of what can still be done."

– *Kreios Maker-of-Riddles, amphore for the Sublime*
Auspice

Antigone was no longer afraid of the woods.

Barefoot, for her sandals were little more than rags and the god had not seen fit to replace them, she walked on soft moss and rocks. Through brush and bushes, following little rivers and climbing trees. Antigone had dreamt of this, of knowing the world beyond the shrine without fear in her heart. Yet in the dreams she had only ever ceased to fear the woods when the woods came to fear *her*. When she slept she wielded the powers of the god and all the world bent as she wished, warm and bright like firelight. Instead, the girl knelt by the river and drank of the clear water as the great she-wolf Lykaia watched over her.

"It doesn't look the same, by day," Antigone told the wolf.

The great wolf whined, cocking her head to the side. She did not know whether Lykaia was as clever as a human or a god, but Antigone knew that the she-wolf was no simple beast. The girl could remember someone telling her a story about a great wolf, once, a wolf that prowled the sky and ate the sun to make it night. The great fire burned its stomach and it spat it out, come morning, but try as she might Antigone could not remember who had told her the story. It had been... it had been a man, she felt sure. Someone warm, someone she had trusted? But she could not remember a face, or a name. It worried her, but not for long.

If she were sick the god would have healed her, so she could not be sick.

"I thought this was a fearful place," Antigone told the wolf.
"That it was... desperate."

The she-wolf whined in conclusion. She bit her lip.

"I thought it was a place of death," Antigone finally said.

That it had been filled with nothing but it, like a slaughterhouse covered by tall branches. Lykaia snorted, then drank of the river too. It did not look like she disagreed with the description.

"But it isn't," Antigone told the wolf. "Not really. There *is* death here, but there is death everywhere. And there's so much more!"

She looked around, thirsty even though she had drunk her fill, and glimpsed it all. The redbirds singing, the snake coiling on the branch. The moss in the shade of trees, the rotten carcasses where mushrooms grew. The tall branches blotting out the sun, the deep roots seeking water. The forest was not just life or death,

it was both. Always both. Like a snake eating its own tail, or a wolf swallowing the sun only to spew it out. It was terrible and it was beautiful, it was loving and it was merciless. It was, she thought, in balance. The thought shivered within her, and Antigone stumbled. Suddenly dizzy, she had to lean down in the grass and wait until the world ceased spinning. Lykaia nudged her, eventually, and she leaned against the great she-wolf as they returned home to the shrine. The strange dizziness had passed by the time the god came to visit her but somehow he seemed to know.

"It is remarkable," the giant-god rumbled, gently holding her chin.

"What is?" Antigone asked.

"You understand," the god said, "better than any of your kind should. They teach it out of you, Antigone, as you grow. The true way of seeing things. And yet your eyes are opening."

She shivered again.

"No matter," the god finally said, releasing her chin. "Answers always come to willing ears. We must be patient, you and I."

"I will be," Antigone promised.

The god looked amused.

"The she-wolf will teach you if you are not, I think," he said. "She is wise, even for her kind."

They ate together, and when the time came the god told her again of old and far off things. The menace of the drakoi had been ended, the god told her, but it was not the end of the story.

"Stories never truly end with victory," the god told her. "We only cut them there so that they might be easier to swallow."

Antigone sagely nodded. She, too, knew the peril of taking bites that were too large.

"It was a different world we found around us," the god said, rumbling voice sounding wistful.

His power sang out, thrumming along with exhale of the once-god's breath. Like heat mirages, thoughts and memories danced in flicked among the raised stones.

"The Long War had lasted for a thousand years, Antigone," the giant said. "Waxing and waning between truce and strife, and while we shattered ourselves putting an end to the tyrannies of the drakoi all manners of creatures had sprouted underfoot."

The girl shivered, as for an ephemeral moment every painted thought shimmering between the stones had been a red and bloody ruin, fire and screams and smoke. She had seen the silhouettes of great cities torn apart, old and merciless things sleeping among the carnage. But the wrath had passed, and beyond it the world looked... young.

"The stouts and the stalkers we had long known as peoples cowering away from the wrath of the drakoi in their deep caverns," the giant-god said, his words reflected by the sight of short bearded folk and nimble small green creatures. "The cautious greys that had hidden below tall peaks we did not often find, but they were known to us as well. Yet with the old tyrants gone, they all crept out of their hiding places."

Like green sprouts after winter, Antigone saw them. Walking ashen grounds with childlike wonder as they looked up at the sky and saw nothing.

"Yet not all children were so cautious," the giant rumbled. "Out east by the sea, we found some fresh race – fangs, we named them, for their ferocity – had been birthed in the steppes and gone south, daring even to claim the ruins of the Windless City."

Intricate towers, Antigone glimpsed, that fire had licked and force of arms shattered. Among them, like filth on snow, swarms of large greenskins raised tents and banners. They fought and burned and forged, butchering animals and each other. She was not of the once-god's people, but even she found a deep sense of revulsion welling up in her throat at the sight.

"Yet most astonishing of them all was your own kind, Antigone," the god said. "Humans had long been known to us, but never like this. While our cities burned and we murdered gods, a race of hunters that had been as much animals as horses and wolves had begun tilling at the land."

Huts of mud, Antigone glimpsed. Fences and cattle, fields where green things grew. And the lands they changed, but everywhere humans were seen.

"All these ungrateful children were sinking roots into the ruins of our great works taken from us," the once-god rumbled, with the faded trace of a great and terrible anger in his voice, "spreading like weeds across lands we had destroyed ourselves to free. And of them all, humans were the worst."

The mirages flickered and for a moment Antigone wondered what it must have been like, looking at her own kind through the eyes of a god. Knowing that all that stood between you and the death of those fragile things was your unwillingness to pick them up and squeeze.

"You spread far and wide," the god said, "and unlike older peoples did not seem to shun any parts of the world. You found ways to thrive in heat and cold, among heights and caverns. You swam lakes and crossed rivers."

It was not the way of the Titans, this. Antigone had learned it. A people whose words reverberated in the world like theirs did, whose very will was power, would not change themselves for the land. They would change it to suit them, and never even consider there might be another way.

"In the hundred years that followed," the giant quietly said, "whenever we returned to our abandoned cities we so often found humans scuttling in their shadows like rats it became... expected. Always pawing at our creations, sometimes in greed and sometimes in worship."

A hundred ephemeral glimpses of people standing in the shadow of great towers and temples, works that bent sunlight and soothed deserts with rain. She understood, deep down, why the ancients would have sought to cling to the greatness of an older people. Was Antigone's own life really so different?

"Our children, they who called themselves the Gigantes, saw this and knew rage," the god said. "They knew fear, they knew dismay, and most fearsomely of all some of them saw this and knew avarice."

The once-god's tone was heavy, pained.

"No longer were the young races called children as we called ourselves, siblings under the Makers," the giant said. "They had names, from then on. And the creatures we named we thought to have power over."

Not, not pain, Antigone thought. Shame. And between the stones danced lights showing three great crowds, each standing facing each other in the backlight of a great cloudy mountaintop.

"Some called for a purge," the giant said. "A thinning of the herd, like pruning errant growths."

The horror of that sunk in, over a long moment, and Antigone found that in the pale light of the mirages she could almost glimpse scarlet, bloody veins.

"They were few," the god said. "We were not so far fallen. But others desired to reclaim our ancient cities and close them to our lessers, leaving the young races to die in the mud, and that chorus was sung by many throats."

Hidden cities, Antigone glimpsed, shrouded by mists and winding paths that no mortal could pierce through no matter how arduously they tried.

"Yet there were even more who beheld the young races and spoke of *rule*," the god said. "Were the young races not the ones who came to us, sleeping in the shade of our wonders and worshipping our works? Why should we not let them serve us, let them repay us for the freedom we had won them at so steep a cost?"

Every word grew more mocking than the last, though by the last one Antigone felt there was as much bitterness as mockery to be found.

"And so the last of the Titans met," the giant said, "we last few of the few, so that a path might be found that would not further sunder an already sundered people."

One by one the mirages died, like candles snuffed out, until only the last fading embers of the fire remained.

"We would fail in this," the god simply said.

He spoke no more that night, and Antigone did not ask.

—

Antigone was growing.

Her clothes were getting too small, and the god often brought new ones. He taught her and showed her the stars, how they moved and how they sang, and by day while he was gone she studied her lessons and walked the forest. The woods were as a second home to her now, even without Lykaia at her side. She knew other beasts now, cats with shining eyes and snakes that talked like humans without a mind. She had sung with three-colour birds until the rain came and nestles deep in the heart of old trees with affectionate foxes in her lap. She had even glimpsed strange creatures, at times, that looked like humans but sang with the world in the way that the god told her humans did not. Beautiful and terrible the creatures had been, wicked in a way that beasts were not.

Of those and the thin places from which they came, Antigone steered clear.

She had thought herself in a place beyond the reach of humans, so it was with utter startlement that she learned otherwise. Come a sunny morning, she found a band of them moving through a clearing. They wore steel and leather, were armed with hooks and swords. Their steps were the steps of hunters and their eyes moved without pause, but they chattered like songbirds. Antigone, seated in a tree, eyed them curiously. Lykaia had gone to hunt,

she was waiting for the she-wolf to return with red fangs before heading back to the shrine.

"Alas, I do not see the promised riches," a man said. "Just a lot of fucking things trying to kill us very hard. Are you sure of the tale, Almera?"

"It was one of the Binder's Blood that told it," a woman replied. "They do not err in such things."

Some of them did a sign with the hands after that, to Antigone's wonderment. She felt like she might have seen it before, but she was not sure where. After all, she knew nothing of her life before she had found the shrine. She mulled over the matter, and decided that this might be a hint as to where she had come from. It was worth speaking with these, and perhaps trading.

"What are you looking for?" Antigone asked from the tree.

Several jumped or cursed, and all brought up weapons. She crawled forward on a branch, head popping out from between the leaves, and asked the question again. Some loosened their grip on their steel when they saw her, but not all.

"What manner of spirit are you?" a man asked.

"I am a girl," Antigone patiently said. "And I know things."

"Do you?" a woman smiled. "How lucky for us, darling. We are looking for an old place, made of stone."

"The bald barrow?" she asked. "I know where it is."

"No," another woman cut in, tone curt. "It would be a temple. Answer us, spirit, where is it?"

She blinked.

"The shrine?" she skeptically asked.

"Yes," the woman hissed, excited. "The temple to the Maker of Riddles. You know where it is?"

Antigone frowned.

"Why do you want to know?"

She must have said something both wrong and right, as several of them looked excited as well but all five raised their weapons.

"I asked you a question, spirit," the same woman said. "Answer it or suffer the consequences."

"You don't have good intentions," Antigone said, cocking her head to the side. "That won't go well for you."

Several laughed.

"If you were mighty among the Splendid, you would not have tried such a feeble bargain," a man mocked. "We have cold iron, creature, do not try our patience."

Antigone's fingers clenched.

"Leave," Antigone said, and the world heard.

There was a ripple in the air and the humans screamed in fear. One of them, who had a spear raised, began bleeding from the ears. The girl drew back in shock and horror. She'd not meant to...

"You little witch," the woman who had called her darling earlier screamed. "*What are you?*"

One of them threw a javelin at her and it sunk into the wood next to her calf after nicking it, but Antigone let out a breath of relief when she saw a streak of grey move at the corner of her eye. Lykaia fell onto the humans without pity, smashing one into a tree and ripping open another's throat in the blink of an eye. It was too much: the rest fled. Lykaia, red in tooth and claw, wanted to pursue. Antigone felt exhausted and strangely sad, however, and so she insisted they return home instead. The she-wolf reluctantly agreed, leaving the bodies for the scavengers. She told the god everything when he came that night, though as she had expected he already knew it all. He did not seem angry that deaths had happened, instead patting her head comfortingly.

"Most of your kind are petty creatures, Antigone," the god said. "Do not expect much of them."

She solemnly nodded, and after a moment the god softly laughed.

"Not that my kind are of superior make," the giant said. "The Gods abhor perfection, child. It leaves nothing for us to seek."

"Were they really looking for the shrine?" Antigone asked.

"It has happened before," the god rumbled. "This place was once known to others of my kind, and the knowledge will have trickled down to some of those they taught."

The god watched her with a smile.

"It seems you learned the name I was once known by," he said. "You had some gain from the bargain."

"Maker-of-Riddles," Antigone murmured, speaking the words correctly.

He nodded.

"It has been long since I last heard those words," the god said. "It is a strange thing."

He sounded almost sad again, as he had often been since the night he'd told her that the council of the Titans would fail. He'd not continued the story since, speaking only of older matters and strange legends.

"Grief, but not so sharp as I had thought," the god murmured. "So perhaps I will speak, after all."

"Of after the Long War?" Antigone quietly asked.

After a long moment, the giant-god nodded.

"When the Titans met that night," the god said, "among us, seven spoke of dominion and only one disagreed."

There were no mirages this time, not swirls of colour. Only soft words by starlight, with the tall stones circling around them like a mother's embrace.

"It was not that we shared the avarice of the children," the god said. "It was that there was so much to do, Antigone, and so few of us left to do it. We thought – I thought, for that night my voice was foremost among the follies – that it would be... transitory. We had connived a way to return all we had lost. Service need only last until we had returned to our old glory, and then the bonds could be released."

The giant sadly smiled.

"One would not brook this," the god said. "And you bear her name. In her fury she cursed us all fools and monsters, drakoi in children's flesh, and to neither argument nor censure did she bow her head."

The god looked up at the stars, wistful.

"Seven of us against one, and she did not bend an inch," the giant said. "And so compromise was struck. She would have leave to go west and found cities as she wished, where it would be her gentle hands that set the laws, and in our old cities instead it would be avarice that held the reins."

He looked back down at the earth, and Antigone somehow felt like weeping. There was sorrow in the retelling, sorrow that was older than stone or wind.

"I was fool twice over, child, for it was my foolish conniving that we attempted," the god said. "Even as she went west and

founded eighteen cities, we built atop mountains of broken backs until I had crafted a riddle I could ask of all the world."

The god shook with anger.

"And even though she despised the entire bloodsoaked altar, when I called she returned," the giant said. "And the Titans met one last time, that together we might move the Pattern itself."

A long, desolate silence followed.

"The Fall broke many things," the god softly said. "Places and peoples, cities gone in the blink of an eye or never made at all. So much was lost, in that moment of utter folly. And the worst will always be that of the seven and one that stood together that night, the sole who survived was the least worthy."

Antigone's throat tightened as the colossal silhouette turned to look down at her.

"I am Kreios Maker-of-Riddles," the giant said. "I was once a god among many, and our demise broke this land in ways that echo still. My children thought me a god still, in the wake of our ruin, and so I left them to find their own way, their own choruses to sing."

She swallowed.

"So why did you come here?" Antigone heard herself ask.

"There was a city not far from here, once," Kreios softly smiled. "One of eighteen. And when the moon was kind, and our prides allowed, I sat among these stones to speak with a dear friend."

"I cannot be her," the girl murmured, terrified of disappointing him. "I never knew her."

"Be who you are, Antigone," the Maker-of-Riddles spoke in a rumbling voice. "Without lie or apology. Without fear or regret. Of you I will never ask more nor less."

He laughed again, bathed in starlight.

"Do this, my child, and you will have done more in the span of your short years to honour her than I did in the crawling eternity of mine," Kreios said. "I never understood it before, you see. That was it always about learning when the torch must be passed."

"I don't know who I want to be," Antigone confessed.

The old god smiled, heartbreakingly gentle.

"Let us learn, then," Kreios said. "Together."

—
Over the many seasons that followed, sometimes humans came to the clearing again.

Seeking, it is said, a witch of the woods.

Grand

“The reed survives the storm, but only in the shadow of the oak.”

— Proceran saying

Princess Adeline's hospitality had been flawless, but it was still with some irritation that Cordelia left the grounds of her Salian estate. Neither the wine nor an exquisite rack of lamb had loosened the Princess of Orne's tongue enough for her to reveal where she stood on the matter of the provisional superintendence. The other woman had greatly risen in influence in the east since the disgrace of House Odon of Bayeux during the coup had ended the family's former prominence. Her position was further strengthened by the unspoken truth that Princess Adeline was Rozala Malanza's voice in Salia, which have her some draw over the other members of Princess Rozala's bloc in the Highest Assembly. That she'd been noncommittal at dinner was not promising.

Riding briskly through the darkened streets of the capital, the First Prince of Procer mulled over the issue as her escort swept ahead to clear the way. She had spent a great deal of goodwill forcing through the measures that had bought the help of the Titanomachy, but not so much that she should be seeing opposition for opposition's sake at the moment. Considering that Rozala and her followers were usually broadly in support of motions that would secure further funding for the war effort — as granting the office of First Prince the right to appointed superintendents to temporarily supervise the princely collection of taxes doubtlessly would — the hesitation must be coming from the perspective that having such a right would grant Cordelia herself too much power.

Perhaps a compromise could be arranged, the fair-haired prince mused. One of Malanza's supporters appointed to the head of that newly founded office, and a motion in the Highest Assembly legally binding the measure to the end of the war against Keter? There was some shouting ahead and Cordelia spurred on her mare, only good manners keeping a frown away from her face. Four of her personal guards were arguing with what looked like an officer of the Salian city guard, tones rising. The First Prince approached, dismissing the young guard who tried to argue that it was all

being handled, and reined in her mount just in time to hear the source of the argument.

"- coming back from a ceremony under House auspices, I can't let you disperse them," the Salian officer was heatedly saying. "You'll have to go around."

"Do you quite understand exactly *who* it is you're speaking to?" Captain Anton flatly replied.

It would be good for her reputation to give way to the commons if nothing else, Cordelia thought, and painted a soft smile on her face as – the only warning was the glint of torchlight on steel, behind the shutters. Without a single word of warning the three shutters on the house to her left were torn down, clearing the way for crossbows that promptly fired. She threw herself back, so that her horse might take the bolts instead, but her reaction had been too slow and... A pale red blade carved through the air with a whistle, the Swaggering Duellist cutting down the projectiles with impossible swiftness. Landing poorly on her elbow, Cordelia still had enough of her wits about her to keep her voice calm as she gave her orders.

"Catch them," the First Prince of Procer said. "Alive."

Agnes had been right, Cordelia Hasenbach grimly thought. They had finally learned to get around her foresight.

—

"Two of them swallowed poison," Louis de Sartrons, head of the Circle of Thorns, calmly said. "The third man knew little, even when put to sharp question, but we confirmed his identity. His husband was arrested, we will see if there is more to be learned."

Cordelia slowly nodded, sipping at her lemon water. Uncle Klaus would have teased her for not even reaching for a proper bottle after a brush with death, if he still spoke to her at all.

"Praes?" she simply asked.

"It was a sloppy operation, by the standards of the Eyes, but I will not dismiss the notion," the skeletal old man said. "We gutted their ability to operate in the Principate after the coup, it could be a reflection of that diminished ability."

The Prince of Rhenia prided herself in her ability to read others, and though Louis de Sartrons had always been a difficult one – as was only befitting of one of three great spymasters of Procer – in this particular instance his thoughts were not deeply hidden.

"You do not believe that," Cordelia said.

"It might have been Praesi crossbows used, but the Silver Letters got their hands on some stock after the Black Knight was captured," the older man said. "Some leftover rebellious elements seem a more likely culprit to me, though they will have a backer."

A Proceran backer, he left unsaid, and that meant a crown. The finest of her spymasters believed that someone in the Highest Assembly was trying to kill her. The blonde Lycaonese hid her dismay by sipping at her lemon water once more. Even now? Gods, even now? She snuffed out the anger that rose before it could turn into something uglier, something dangerous. Cordelia set down the cup, mistress of her own mood once more.

"Keep me informed," the First Prince said. "That aside, the original reason for this meeting still applies. You have word from the League?"

Louis de Sartrons, thin as a stick and balding, spent a moment watching her before finally his lips quirked.

"Indeed," he said. "The Magisterium of Stygia is reaching out to us through informal means. They are interested in the Grand Alliance, and Procer in particular, brokering peace in the region."

Of course there are, Cordelia thought. Were she a less courteous woman, she would allowed herself a nasty little smile. General Basilia, fresh off her success in installing *Princess Zenobia* as ruler of Nicae, had negotiated a truce with the rulers of Atalante and with her northern flank clear had begun to march into Stygian territory. She'd not even waited for the Magisterium to declare war on her, catching them by surprise, and several of the small cities that Stygia and Nicae regularly fought to rule over had immediately rebelled at the news. The chaos had the magisters unnerved, and rumor had it that Delos was not only disinclined to help but looking at snatching a few border territories for itself.

The Secretariat, for all its scholarly reputation, was just as opportunistically cutthroat as the other rulers of the Free Cities.

"Allow me to guess," Cordelia airily said. "We must help them, lest wicked Basilia take all of the Free Cities, and they will offer a few concessions to sweeten the bargain."

"They offer to break ties with Dread Empress Malicia," Louis de Sartrons replied, sounding faintly amused. "And not to make offensive war for twenty-five years following the peace, save for the four thousand soldiers they would lend to the Grand Alliance

for war against Keter. The usual bribes and gifts were added, of course, as it their way."

In other words, the Magisterium wanted to hide behind a treaty for a quarter century as its rivals returned to warring against each other and wanted to buy this at the cheap price of abandoning an ailing ally and sending the oldest of their slave phalanx to die up north instead of disposing of the aging soldiers themselves.

"Put them off," Cordelia ordered.

It was tempting to try to make a bargain while the alliance they backed – Basilia and Zenobia – was on the rise and before it dissolved into backstabbing as most Free Cities alliances did, but it would be a mistake. If Stygia lost a battle or two on the field as well as a deeper cut of territory, it would offer much better terms. Besides, the First Prince would not intervene too deeply in the region without first holding council with the Queen of Callow. General Basilia was under Catherine Foundling's patronage, containing her without the Black Queen's assent would be... indelicate.

"I will see to it, Your Most Serene Highness," the spymaster replied. "As for Mercantis, we have confirmed that Merchant Prince Mauricius is taking bribes from the Tower."

Cordelia's teeth clenched, though she hid it. Bribes, so that he might help along the end of the world? The utter selfish madness of that was infuriating. What good would gold do when the Dead King was at the gates of Mercantis? Did Mauritius believe he'd be able to buy a peace with death?

"He is not their man, however," Louis de Sartrons noted. "We intercepted some communications of the Eyes, and it seems that Malicia is rather displeased that he is taking the coin without delivering on what is asked. Though the man remains untrustworthy, Your Highness, I believe that his intent is to play us against Praes and enrich himself as much as possible in the process."

Which, while morally repellent in every war, was something that the First Prince could work with. Procer was already deeply in debt, but Cordelia had been gathering resources for this very eventuality. Artworks, artefacts, ancient treasures that her predecessors had filled palaces with. There would be talk in the Highest Assembly at a Lycaonese like her 'pawning off' the wonders of her southern precursors, but let them talk. If it kept the Principate afloat, she was not above allowing the edges of her reputation to be tarred.

"Find out the price," the First Prince of Procer evenly said. "But pass word along to the Painted Knife: she now has free rein to hunt Praesi agents in Mercantis as she wishes."

The City of Bought and Sold could do with a reminder that the Grand Alliance had teeth of its own. Cordelia drank the last of her lemon water, slowly so that the angle of her arm would never be boorish, and allowed herself a long breath as she set the cup down. Tired as she was, there was more yet to do.

There was always more to do.

—

It was embarrassing for Cordelia to be forced to mediate in the matter, not because her authority had been called on but rather because the dispute involved one of her closest allies.

Prince Renato Braganzo of Salamans, who had followed his brother into being one of her partisans and bared sword in her defence during the botched coup. The mustachioed Prince of Salamans had been painstakingly polite since he had been invited to sit but could not quite hide his anger for the man across the table. Prince Salazar Arazola of Valencis, eldest child of Princess Leonor and her successor since her abdication at the Princes' Graveyard. The young man was more aggressive than his mother had been – Leonor had been careful never to lean too closely the way of the First Prince or her opposition – but he'd also signaled an open mind to aligning himself more closely to Cordelia's politics than she'd been willing to entertain.

Which made it all the more unfortunate that the two princes were one the edge of open war.

"There isn't a noble south of Cantal that doesn't know the *Bonito Finales* are in the service of the Arazola," Prince Renato bit out.

"The crown of Valencis holds no such contract, as I have told you more than once," Prince Salazar evenly replied. "Further accusations, Prince Renato, would be a matter of honour."

Renato was a seven-sun duellist, from what Cordelia recalled, but while Salazar might still be on his fourth sun he was a reputation as a sharp sword and his lesser rank was rumoured to come largely from his lack of formal matches. The First Prince had been following the dispute long before it reached her seat of power, the Silver Letters – temporarily under the authority of Louis de Sartrons, making him the most powerful spymaster in the history of the Principate – having tried to ferret out the truth of the claims made on each side. Prince Renato was understandably furious because a dozen towns in western Salamans had been extorted by a fantassin company, the Bonito Finales, who had even

dared to sack a town when it refused to 'pay extraordinary taxes'.

Said company had been in the pay of the House of Arazola for decades but never formally, as it was used largely for strikes at its Valencis' neighbours that the princes of Valencis did not want publicly tied to them. It was an open secret in Arlesite lands who the Bonito Finales answered to, however, which meant that though difficult to prove by legal means Prince Renato's anger was well-founded.

The trouble was that, according to the Silver Letters, Prince Salazar had not ordered the mercenaries to attack Salamans. The fantassins had not been paid in six months, which Cordelia's agents believed to be the reason they'd taken to extorting towns. Prince Salazar, however, could not admit as much without also admitting to House Arazola having attacked its neighbours for decades with the Bonito Finales. With the younger man's hold on his throne still shaky and his treasury near empty, admitting to that was the kind of mistake that would see him overthrown by an ambitious cadet branch of the Arazola. Worse, Prince Renato had sent some of his horse too unseasoned to campaigned against the dead at the border of the principalities and done some provocative forays into northeastern Valencis as a sharp warning. No skirmished had ensued for now, but Cordelia knew it was only a matter of time if this kept up.

"I am sure His Grace only meant to express frustration at the raiding on his lands, Prince Salazar, not to impugn your honour," the First Prince warmly smiled. "No doubt you would be just as incensed had a Valencian town been sacked, as any worthy prince would."

The young man eyed her warily but slowly nodded. Good, Cordelia thought. So long as Salazar recognized that extorted tribute could be repaid but a sacked town was a much starker offence, this could be salvaged. People had died, but the First Prince must ensure than this conversation would not end in a way that made the number swell.

"These... animals came from the south," Prince Renato said. "From Valencis. Do you deny that too, *Your Grace*?"

"These are troubled times," the Prince of Valencis replied. "Neither roads nor countryside are settled. If bandits passed through my lands I offer my apologies, but who is to say if this is true? They could have come through Aequitan instead. Princess Rozala took much of her soldiery north, her holdings have grown turbulent."

So had everyone else's, Cordelia knew. With so few armed men remaining in the southern principalities and such heavy burdens being forced onto the people, an increasing amount of commoners

preferred to riot or turn bandit rather than let themselves be squeezed any further. And though Salazar might think himself clever, trying to push the blame onto Princess Rozala – a common adversary to Cordelia and Prince Renato – he had blundered. The Prince of Salamans reddened at the sight of what would seem to him the younger royal trying to slither out of paying for his crimes, and the First Prince simply could not allow one of her finest generals to be troubled over a matter to which she had no real relation.

Besides, the backdraft in the people's opinion should Rozala be recalled or condemned over something like this would be... severe. Her popularity had only risen since her stunning victory at Trifelin.

"One cannot bring such an issue to trial before the Assembly without evidence," Cordelia said, her tone a warning to the furious Renato. "Though I expect, Prince Salazar, that you understand hosting such reprobates *would* be worthy of censure."

It would not be treason, not even under the terms of Cordelia's yet-to-be-repealed crusade authorities, but it would represent a failure of a prince's sworn duty to ensure the safety of the lands he ruled over. To depose a prince over something of this sort was not a precedent anyone would want to set, given that every principality deal with banditry to some extent, but censure would pass without trouble given that it was a largely symbolic measure. Or would be, the First Prince knew, were Prince Salazar's hold on his throne secure. A censure would do just as well as a confession of misdeeds, for the ambitious cousins of the Prince of Valencis seeking a pretext for overthrow.

"Of course," the young man replied, bowing his head. "I would not tolerate the presence of murderers in Valencis."

Cordelia smiled pleasantly, knowing she'd led him to stand where she needed him to. Should the Silver Letters come through, as Louis de Sartons believed they soon would, then this could be settled neatly. Presently, however, Prince Renato looked on the verge of speaking in anger. Best to end this before he could. The First Prince elegantly wielded her precedence over the two in etiquette to prevent them from directly addressing each other until she called the conversation to an end, hinting at Salazar that he should depart first. Perhaps sensing he had made a misstep, the young prince followed the unspoken suggestion and left her to speak with Prince Renato a little longer. The older man calmed, after being offered a second cup of tea, but the anger was still in him.

"I will not let almost a hundred deaths go unanswered, Your Most Serene Highness," the Prince of Salamans told her. "Justice must be had."

"And it will be, rest assured of that," Cordelia calmly replied. "War, however, would be disastrous."

"I dare not recall my riders until those mercenaries are hanging from gallows," Prince Renato replied, a tad coldly.

"I would ask no such thing," Cordelia smiled. "It seems unwise, however, for them to continue their forays into Valencis. They only serve to warn the bandits of their arrival, making the coming hunt more difficult."

The mustachioed prince, for all that in some ways he was more openly emotional than most Arlesite royalty, was no fool. He grasped the message she had sent: that there would, in fact, be a hunt.

"Perhaps there is truth to what you say," the Prince of Salamans reluctantly said, then sighed. "You have been a true friend to the House of Bragzanzo, Your Highness, and so I will take you to your word. The order will be sent."

"You have my thanks," the First Prince said, inclining her head. "I understand the trust that has been extended."

The older man looked faintly rueful.

"Then allow me to offer words on wisdom as well, Your Highness," Prince Renato said. "The opposition to the matter of provisional superintendence you mean to bring to a vote in the Assembly runs perhaps deeper than you know."

Cordelia maintained her calm with great effort, face betraying nothing. Her silence invited elaboration.

"I have been approached," the Prince of Salamans said, "by other sitters of the Highest Assembly. Concerns were expressed as to the power such a measure, even if temporary, would concentrate in the office of First Prince."

The fair-haired prince did not bother to note that the measure could be enshrined by law as limited in length, knowing the objection went deeper: it was the precedent that her fellow princes were uncomfortable with. They saw it, she suspected, as the first step towards making her office as a queenship over Procer. Power granted in a crisis could be granted anew, with lesser pretexts, or simply never set down at all. The worst of them would be the most scared, she thought. Those who had been underreporting the taxes due to high throne for years, if not decades, and were now afraid that their crimes would come back to haunt them.

As if Cordelia wanted to start a civil war in the middle of a struggle for the Principate's very existence, as if she did not

simply want the princes and princess of Procer to simply *obey the laws they had agreed to*. The surge of fury kept her from speaking for a few long moments, revealing more than she would have wished. The other prince looked, she thought, almost sympathetic.

"No doubt there is truth to what you say," Cordelia Hasenbach echoed, her smile a careful artifice.

—

Once she knew the right questions to ask, answers came in battalions.

It was a conspiracy, but not the kind that Cordelia was used to breaking. It was not the old politics of the Highest Assembly, the tiresome but predictable factionalism that came of jostling for prominence in that hall, but an altogether older game. It was fear not of the implacable foe in the distant north but of the very high throne she sat, of what it meant. Her reforms, though passed into law by vote after vote, had stoked that fear to new heights and it had spread like a sickness to even people she had considered close allies. Princess Isabelle of Tenerife, a steady supporter since her ascension, had turned on her. So had Sophie's younger brother in Lyonis, even as he swore by letters to follow his abdicated sister's old friendships.

Orense, Arans, Bayeux — so much for Arsene Odon returning the mercy she'd shown him in the wake of the coup — Segovia, Cleves and finally Orne, the very same Princess Adeline who'd hosted her on the night where assassins had struck. Adeline was, her spymaster believed, if not the leader of the conspiracy then at the very least its most influential member.

"It is a large bloc," Louis de Sartrons said, "but not large enough to defeat a motion in the Assembly you might put forward."

"It is," Cordelia replied, shaking her head. "While I have patronized most of the fresh sitters in the Assembly, they will not remain under my guidance forever. When an opposition bloc this large is unveiled, it is certain to draw in some of them."

If nothing else, some of the crowns in her debt would seek to free themselves of her influence by aligning with her opponents. Worse, the moment she no longer had a clear majority in votes several of her looser allies would reconsider lending their own. The Lycaonese vote was solid, as were Brus and Salamans, but aside from that perhaps the only one she could rely on if hard-pressed was the Princess of Creusens.

"You are certain that Rozala Malanza has no role in this?" Cordelia asked, indulging in a rare instance of repeating a question already asked.

"We have personal letters of Princess Adeline specifying that she was not to be informed," the spymaster said. "It appears to be the Princess of Orne's own initiative, and she believes that Malanza would not react amenably."

Cordelia dismissed the older man, needing to be alone with her thoughts. The nights of Salia had warmed, allowing her to have her windows opened for the breeze to whisper through, and the First Prince of Procer leaned against the windowsill as she looked out at the city below. When had Princess Isabella turned, she wondered? Had it been forcing Gaspard Langevin to abdicate for scheming to betray their allies in the middle of a war that had done it? Or perhaps even earlier, the decree that'd obligated every prince to make the sum of their debts and the identity of their debtors known – a necessity, if Cordelia was to bargain with Mercantis for the realm. It could have been the Principate-wide restrictions on exported metals, the ordained sale of all grain reserves beyond a certain amount to the high throne, the tax of on the sale of any warhorses sold outside the war effort or even the repeal of the ancient ban on silver from the Dominion being allowed into legal Proceran coinage.

Necessary measures, Cordelia had argued before the Assembly, and always they had agreed.

And now nearly a third of that same Assembly was scheming to defeat her proposal for superintendence, even now reaching out for support among her own allies. It was not a negotiation that Princess Adeline was attempting, that much was clear: the numbers she'd already gathered would have been enough for Cordelia to take her seriously, for a genuine attempt at a compromise over terms to be made. The Princess of Orne wanted her to lose a formal vote on the floor of the Highest Assembly for the first time since the failed coup, a stinging and public rebuke.

"Was I truly so much of a tyrant, Adeline Sauveterre, that you could not even attempt words?" Cordelia murmured.

And she had been careful, so very careful, not to step on toes beyond what survival demanded. For every decree passed Cordelia Hasenbach had set three aside, never brought them to light out of a desire to avoid being seen as taking advantage of the crisis to push through her reforms. Many would have helped, cut away some of the many tumorous growths the Principate had accrued over centuries of venality and corruption, but the First Prince had chosen to use her influence only sparingly. Gods Above, she had fought the White Knight and bargained with the Black Queen to preserve the rights of the same royals now sharpening knives for her back. Had she truly been so domineering that this should be seen as earned, as courted?

Cordelia placed a hand over her heart, where the last words her cousin would every write her stayed with her. How many of her

kin, of her people, had she sacrificed for the preservation of the Principate of Procer?

Enough, Cordelia Hasenbach thought.

The First Prince sent for the same spymaster she had dismissed, as she had orders to give.

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Prince Salazar was smiling, expectant. He had reached out through intermediaries to inform the Silver Letters of the same conspiracy that Prince Renato had told her of days ago, adding that it had approached him. No doubt he expected his support was about to be bought with a resolution of the dispute in his favour. Cordelia instead had her attendant — Léonie, today — present him with three parchment sheaths.

"A gift, Your Highness?" the Prince of Valencis gamely asked.

"In a manner of speaking," Cordelia replied. "Two of these are transcriptions of letters your mother exchanged with Captain Raoul of the Bonito Finales, regarding raids into Aequitan and Salamans that were undertaken at her explicit order."

The young prince went very, very still.

"Fakes," Prince Salazar hotly said.

"The signature is an assumed name, but the handwriting is hers," Cordelia said. "Your cousin, Lady Francisca, has attested to this by oath sworn under the auspices of the House of Light."

"A transparent plot to ruin my good name, surely Your Highness can see this," the Prince of Valencis tensely replied.

"The third," Cordelia said, "is a letter you will receive by noon from a captain in your service, reporting that he has found the same company holed up in the town of Salanera. Near the border with Aequitan, I believe. They appear to be in collusion the ruling lord, having bought his friendship with a cut of the loot from Salamans."

The young prince paled. This was, they now both understood, not a negotiation. It never had been.

"Your principality troops will join those of Prince Renato in capturing these bandits," Cordelia said. "The crown of Valencis will offer appropriate reparations to the crown of Salamans for the extortion and the sacked town, which took place due to its negligence. It will also send the ruling lord of Salanera to Prince Renato so that he might be tried in the royal court as accomplice to all these deeds."

Prince Salazar's brow creased ever so slightly as the younger ruler grasped that he was not going to be personally being attainted for any of this. That no mention of his mother's letters had been made. Cordelia pleasantly smiled.

"I understand you were approached for an alliance by interested parties," the First Prince said.

"I have, it seems, already chosen my side," Prince Salazar said, a tad drily.

"So you have," Cordelia evenly replied. "Accept it regardless."

The Prince of Salamans was no Arnaud Brogloise, monstrously ruthless in the service of the greater good of the Principate, but he would serve her purposes regardless.

"What a lark that will be," the prince sighed, accepting the brisk turn of the Ebb with some grace. "And what I am to uncover your behalf, Your Highness?"

"Do you know, Your Grace, what the legal definition of warfare is according to our laws?" Cordelia asked.

Prince Salazar cocked an eyebrow. It was elementary knowledge, to a prince.

"Action undertaken on behalf of a crown that meets the requirements of violence, trespass and righteousness," he said.

"Indeed," the First Prince said. "That is, at least, one of them."

"I do not follow your meaning," Prince Salazar admitted.

"This definition came after the reforms that followed the teachings of Sister Salienta," Cordelia said. "The powers granted to the office of First Prince in time of crusade were determined much earlier in the history of the Principate, and so function under an earlier legal definition of warfare."

Proving this beyond dispute had been difficult, but then the First Prince did have a particularly skilled Librarian at hand. The fair-haired princess amiably smiled.

"You are to find me treason, Prince Salazar," she said, "that does not know what it is."

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"Prince Florimont Langevin," Louis de Sartons said.

The name echoed in the silence of the parlour. The Prince of Cleves, it seemed, had not forgiven the forced abdication of his

father. That it had been made necessary by a nearly disastrous bout of stupidity that had not only embarrassed the Principate and burned goodwill with some of its most important allies but also nearly drawn in Chosen into Proceran territorial disputes was evidently of little importance. It must be, else why else would the son of Gaspard Langevin not only join Princess Adeline's alliance but go even a step further and even attempt Cordelia's assassination?

"He was approached by the last vestiges of the rebellious Silver Letters, not the other way around, but he appears to have embraced the opportunity eagerly," the spymaster continued.

Prince Florimont had been busier than Cordelia ever knew, it seemed. She had wondered at his lingering in the capital even after the Highest Assembly confirmed him as Prince of Cleves, but believed it to be mere courting of a place as one of Rozala Malanza's followers through Princess Adeline. What an ambitious young man he had turned out to be.

"Do we have proof?" Cordelia asked.

"Enough to stain his reputation, should we release it," the skeletal old man said. "Nothing that would sway the Highest Assembly, however. It is all circumstantial, or lesser proof."

Nothing material and evident, the last meant, or testimony only by individuals who could not take an oath under House auspices – because of past criminal offences, contradicting oaths or possession of magic. It was a dark irony, Cordelia considered, that the last of these three was an injustice she had several times restrained herself from undoing because she'd believed it would have caused too strong a resentment in the Highest Assembly. Neither just nor unjust, she had instead straddled the line and reaped only the worst of what she had sown. A lesson, the First Prince of Procer thought, that was worth learning.

"Reputation is not enough," Cordelia said.

"I assure you, what we have is suggestive enough the House of Langevin would be made into pariahs," Louis de Sartons said. "They would be stripped of all allies."

"Arsene Odon was without allies, after the coup," Cordelia said. "And now here he is again, dogging my footsteps as part of the conspiracy of Princess Adeline."

"You spared Clotilde of Aisne as well, and she has held true," the spymaster noted.

Ah, Cordelia thought, but for how long will she hold?

"Florimont Langevin is not cut of the same cloth as she," Cordelia said. "You know this to be true. To corner him and let him stew in his resentment would be recklessly neglectful."

Louis de Sartrons studied her for a long moment, eyes shadowed.

"A decision of some weight," the spymaster said.

"It can be done?" Cordelia asked.

"It can," the old man said. "Should it?"

She met his gaze, unblinking.

"If you remain of the same mind on the morrow," he finally said, "then I will obey. Yet I request, humbly, that you reflect on this. It is not an order that should lightly be given."

He took his leave soon after, leaving her to her thoughts. Cordelia had duties she ought to see to, her hours never empty, but instead she had her maids fetch her a shawl and headed for the garden. It was a pleasant enough night out, though not so warm that the First Prince would have gone without the shawl, but that mattered little to Agnes Hasenbach. She wore a long pale dress, already stained from grass and dirt, and the sensible shoes that Cordelia had gotten her last winter solstice. She was also seemingly lost in thought, seated on her favourite bench and looking up at the stars. Cordelia sat by her cousin's side, letting the silence stretch out.

It was almost restful, to be with someone who required nothing of her.

The Augur emerged from her thoughts after a long while, that short bob of blond hair turning in startlement when she realized she had company. Agnes' eyes – Hasenbach blue, cold and clear – were confused for a few heartbeats, until her mind returned to the here and the now.

"It is taking longer than it once did," Cordelia quietly said.

Her cousin sighed.

"Snow falls, rivers flow," Agnes Hasenbach simply said.

An old saying of their people, warning that rage against the inevitable was wasted breath.

"I have favours that could be called on," Cordelia murmured, "among Chosen and Damned alike."

And those that she had not traded with, she could be introduced to. Neither the White Knight nor the Black Queen would be the kind to refuse her this sort of boon.

"It avails us nothing," Agnes said, sounding surprised they'd not already had that conversation. "It only... ah, it is not winter yet?"

"No," Cordelia gently said. "It is not."

"I was following far threads," Agnes said. "In the south. They grow clearer now, fates are precipitating."

There was a beat of silence.

"Did you come to ask about Hainaut?" her cousin asked. "It is only light, Cordelia. Blinding. It does not change."

The First Prince of Procer smiled, the first time today the gesture felt genuine.

"I had though to ask you for advice, in truth," Cordelia admitted.

"Owls are gossips," Agnes helpfully replied, "but you can trust a pigeon, so long as it is well-fed. Those of Salia are very nosy, but they do not spread the secrets."

It was unfortunate that only Agnes seemed able to speak with birds in such a manner, as the blonde princess suspected that pigeons would be staggeringly successful spies should they be put to work. Some of Cordelia's peers seemed to favour friendships with martial Chosen and Damned, but to her this was frank stupidity: the most useful of such souls in her service was the Forgetful Librarian, who while barely able to use cutlery instead brought to the table the ability to see through ever single correspondence cipher under the sun. Her own spymaster had broached the subject of permanent employment there, and she was inclined to agree.

"There is a choice that must be made," Cordelia told her cousin. "And I do not know the face of the right answer, should there even be one."

Agnes studied her a moment.

"This is not a question for the Augur," she finally said.

"No," Cordelia quietly agreed.

It was a question for one of the last people in this world she could trust with her thoughts.

"I do not know of Ebb and Flow," Agnes hesitantly said. "We never learned, any of us. There was always you for it. It was a relief, that it could all be entrusted to you."

"I sometimes wonder how much I truly learned, Agnes," Cordelia said. "Every mercy I give is repaid with treachery, every striving for reform met with sullen resentment. It is not that I am unskilled at this game, I know better than that. I simply seems..."

She bit her lip.

"As if, sometimes, I am the only one in that hall that sees Procer as in need of mending," Cordelia said.

"The Assembly changes too quickly," Agnes muttered. "Gives me headaches."

Even odds, the Prince of Rhenia mused, whether she meant their futures or simply their names.

"But when I make choices," Agnes quietly continued, "I have a rite."

Cordelia's smile eased, and she met her cousin's eyes seriously. Agnes nodded, satisfied.

"I make myself remember who I am," the Augur said. "Where I am, when. And then I ask myself what it is I want."

And Cordelia's heart broke a little bit for the cousin she'd known since they were both but girls, for the way her expression wavered when she admitted she so often forgot all these things. But she would take it seriously, the First Prince told herself. She closed her eyes, breathing out. She knew who she was, for it might as well have been branded into her soul Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer, Princess of Salia and Prince of Rhenia, Warden of the West and Protector of the Realms of Man. She sat here in Salia, the heart of the Principate, as the realm faced the coming of the end times. Knowing all this, embracing it, what did she want? Survival, for Procer and for herself, but that was not a want so much as a need. She dug deeper.

"I want to make Procer what it should be," Cordelia Hasenbach quietly said. "What we promise the world it is, only to so utterly fail."

Agnes nodded, eyes already half-gone.

"Then you know," the Augur said, "the choice you must make."

She turned to look at the sky again, going silent, and Cordelia breathed out shallowly.

So she did.

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The timing had to be particular so that the proper effect would be achieved. The session for the vote on the provisory superintendence was called at the end of the month, as had been announced, but in the few hours that preceded the royals or the representatives setting foot in the Chamber of Assembly a few events took place in quick succession.

First, as she participated in the charitable distribution of bread to the impoverished people of the Silenin neighbourhood the First Prince of Procer was shot by a crossbow in broad daylight.

Second, Prince Florimont Langevin of Cleves took a crossbow bolt through the back of the head as returned from a visit to an upscale brothel.

Before the hour had passed Salia was a city-wide riot. The Dread Empire was blamed, but there was talk of there being traitors in the Highest Assembly that had helped the easterners. "Too Many Cooks" was heard sung in the streets shortly before cobblestones and rotten fruit were thrown at the mansion belonging to the Prince of Bayeux, though Arsene Odon was far from the capital.

Third, formal messengers were sent to every royal and *assermenté* in the city to confirm that the First Prince lived and the session of the Assembly would still be held.

Fourth, a mere hour before the session was to be held every member of Princess Adeline's conspiracy save the princess herself received two scrolls. One held evidence for the dealings of Florimont Langevin relating to an assassination attempt. The other laid out the legal case for treason committed by Adeline Sauveterre.

Fifth, the Pilfering Dicer was tasked with stealing the luck of one woman in particular until misfortune plagued her like fleas might a dog.

And so when the First Prince of Procer entered the Chamber of Assembly, her torso bandaged more for effect than out of need, it was to silence. Every whisper had died the moment she came into the hall. There was still one of them missing, for Princess Adeline of Orne had been unfortunately delayed after she was thrown by her horse, but the session began without her.

"As First Prince of Procer," Cordelia Hasenbach said, "I declare that every vote held this evening will be entered into the formal public record."

It was the Alamans here who first understood the threat, not her own countrymen or the Arlesites. It had always been the people of the lakes, of the heartlands of Procer, who best understood the weight the opinions of the people carried. It fell into place, after that, one stroke at a time. Prince Salazar of Valencis

brought forth the accusation of treason against Princess Adeline, making the faces of more than a few conspirators pale in dread. Evidence was brought out, mere technicalities – movement of troops through the territory of another prince without explicit permission, an act of war under ancient laws, and the hiring away of fantassins already in the service of another without reparations being offered – but enough that the legal requirements were met.

These were, every soul in this room understood, almost laughable charges. Only a First Prince with unshakable support in the Highest Assembly, with power and influence at their zenith, might feasibly attempt such a transparent ploy without being run out of the Chamber. And still, after the evidence was laid out, only silence followed. And in that silence the howls of the people echoed loudly, the riots that had yet to end. Cordelia Hasenbach watched the Highest Assembly with cold eyes. *Which of you, she asked them silently, wants to be known to the mob as the traitor that helped shelter treason? Which of you wants to be known on every whisper as the Praesi hireling, as the turncoat that bickered with the First Prince of Procer while her breast was still bloodied?*

Princess Adeline of Orne stormed into the Chamber but moments later, unannounced by heralds, but before she could so much as speak a word Cordelia Hasenbach addressed the Highest Assembly.

"I now call for the vote on the charges of treason laid against Adeline Sauveterre, Princess of Orne," the First Prince calmly said, voice echoing across the hall.

One after another the votes came, and Adeline went from mocking to defiant to deflated and finally to *shaking*. Falling on her knees. She was condemned unanimously.

"See her out," Cordelia ordered the guards.

She called the vote on the provisional superintendence, then, and after not a word of debate it passed unanimously. She saw then in their eyes the belief that it was done, that they were free of this drumming. Cordelia Hasenbach did not free them. Instead she called for a vote on the repeal of the law preventing magicians from taking oaths under the auspices of the House of Light.

By midnight, she had passed every single reform she had ever wanted to pass.

They would unseat her for this, in time, but what of it?

Cordelia Hasenbach knew exactly who she was, and what it was she wanted.

Beatification I

"To know one thing perfectly is to know all the world."

– Extract from "Ten Sun", famous swordsmanship manual of Saint Felipe the Duellist

Montfort was a dead place.

It was a pretty little town by the river, near sunlit woods rich with fruits and game. The harvests were lush, the weather good and the taxes low. The town was close enough to the good road north for peddler caravans to pass, but not important enough to pay it attention when wars swept through. There were some who might have called Montfort a taste of the Heavens in the mortal realm, but to Laurence it was bloody torture. Nothing ever *happened* here, save for the same things as last year with some slight deviation. Someone's son married someone's daughter, the same feasts were thrown on the same days and the same peddlers came out to sell the same trinkets.

Laurence thought it must be the deadest place in the world, like an apple with crinkling flesh but only dust at the heart of it. None in Montfort seemed to agree with her, though. She was the cradle maker's daughter, and she was proud of her father's work – he made these beautifully sculpted cradles entirely by his own hands, even cutting the tree himself – but she had no interest in taking up his trade. Neither did she want to follow in her mother's footsteps, to run a household and raise children. And they tried, they did, but they worried that without a trade or a family she be imperiled when they passed.

There were only so many times Laurence could be introduced to young men or asked to help in the workshop before wanting to scream.

And she knew what she wanted to do, she did. Laurence might only be thirteen, but she'd felt her calling: she was going to be a swordswoman. A three-sun duellist had blown through town, when she'd been younger, and she still remembered the way his blade shone in the sun as he demonstrated his skill for the townsfolk. She wanted it for herself, the masterfulness he'd shown that day. It was why she had begun to chop firewood for her family and the neighbours' as well – a swordswoman would need muscle – and she had traded with the blacksmith for him to make a sword out of scrap iron. It was not much, but she could practice swinging with it and wasn't that a start?

She'd thought her parents had made their peace with it, but she'd been wrong.

"It is time to set aside that silly toy," Mother firmly told her, on a summer morning. "You will be a young woman soon, we can no longer indulge your fancies."

"It is not a fancy," Laurence bit out, mortified. "And I am not *playing*."

Yet Mother was unmoved, and when she appealed to her father he was of a similar mind.

"There is no need for a swordswoman in Montfort, Laurence," Father told her. "It will not feed you, child, and we have not had a militia since before my birth. I will not force you to follow my trade or wed, but you must find *some* sort of occupation."

It was unfair and they understood nothing, but Laurence bit her tongue. They loved her, and she them, so she would not speak words she'd regret. Instead she bade her time, and when the caravan came in the weeks before the summer solstice she spoke with the hard-eyed woman who led it.

"You hire guards, I hear," Laurence boldly said, and showed her sword. "I would offer my services."

She kept the blade in the sheath she'd cobbled together, so that the older woman would not see it was iron instead of steel. The merchant looked as if she would laugh, for a moment, but mercifully she did not.

"You want to leave Montfort?" she asked.

"I do," Laurence fervently replied.

"I would have too, at your age," the woman said. "But I have no need for more guards."

Laurence's heart fell.

"I'm told you work hard, though," the merchant said. "Chop wood and fetch water. I could use another pair of hands to handle chores while we travel."

It paid with nothing but meals and a roof, though Laurence was promised coppers if she helped move merchandise and raise stalls when they passed through towns. It was not the glorious beginning Laurence had wanted, but it was a beginning.

When the caravan left a sennight after the solstice fair, she left with it.

It was months of hard work without the slightest glamour to it. Laurence walked besides the wagons and did as she was told, sometimes scraping together a few coppers always spent too soon. She tried to talk some of the caravan guards into teaching her a few tricks, but they looked down on her. Just a servant, they said, and that she had no business pretending to be like them. The sole one who warmed to her was an older boy with Thierry, and it turned out it was not the metal kind of sword he was interested in teaching her to handle. She scorned him harshly when he grew too insistent, which further soured the caravan guards on her when a reprimand came from the caravan mistress in the wake of the scuffle.

It was in the town of Souquet that she found her opportunity. Well, her and half a dozen of the guards. Souquet was but a small town on the side of the road in southern Lyonis, one rumoured to be on terrible terms with the lady ruling it from a nearby estate, but it had come to host a duellist. A five-sun duellist, Laurence overheard in the tavern, and one who was about to open a school in town with the local lady's own blessing. There would be a public test on the morrow that all were invited to attend, and among those who did well Master Guillaume – the duellist – would choose pupils. The test was at midday and the caravan left with dawn, however, so Laurence had a choice to make.

The months on the road had not quelled her conviction: she took the chance without hesitation. It was fate for her to be chosen, though she rather hoped that fate did not end up saddling her with Thierry as a fellow pupil. He was among the six guards that left the caravan to try their luck the same as her. The guards had some silver, though, so that night they slept in rooms after a nice meal while Laurence swept the floors and did the dishes in exchange for being allowed to sleep in the stables afterwards. She even had to mop up when an old drunk threw up on the floor, some ragged one-handed fantassin that was said to wander around drunkenly during the day and return on evenings for his drink. Laurence had seen he had a well-worn scabbard and figured his spirits might just have been broken in war so out of pity she dragged him into the stables too, in the stall next to hers.

The test came at noon, as had been ordained, and Master Guillaume strolled in with the air of a proper duellist. He was a tall and muscled man, his cuirass and coat pristine while his broad-rimmed hat was extravagantly large and the swords at his hip bejeweled. He played to his audience, which consisted of mostly of travellers and would-be-pupils like Laurence. Few townsfolk came, and all those wary. Laurence had overhead last night while working that the duellists' endorsement by Lady Ninon had the townspeople suspicious of him. After a speech and some displays, Master Guillaume got on with presenting his test.

"I am a practical man, but I have studied deep of the philosophies of my art," Master Guillaume said. "And so I cut to the heart of it with this test. Footwork and technique can be taught, but swordsmanship needs one thing of all its students: the willingness to *cut*."

And so the duellist had a menagerie led out into a pen he'd erected in the public square. There were two sickly pigs in there, several hens past their prime and even an aging dog gone blind. Laurence had thought there would be fighting or perhaps a test of pain to measure their determination but it was not that the duellist asked of them.

"To all those that would become my students, I give you this task: cut and cause death," Master Guillaume ordered.

There was rippling unease in the small crowd for a long moment before the first woman stepped up with a hard laugh and bared a blade. After that it was as if a dam had broken, nearly all of the fourteen people who'd come to be students stepping up. Laurence lingered with the two who backed out, hesitating for a time, but then she forced herself. Already the pigs had been butchered under the assessing gaze of Master Guillaume, the hens running away as the dog began to growl in a corner. Laurence unsheathed her iron sword and stepped into the pen, but she could not make herself go through with it. What kind of a sick test was this?

She was to be a duellist, not a butcher. A sword should not be used for the likes of this. Yet she was the last who'd gone into the pen not to have struck any animal, and now all that remained was a hen bleeding out from a blind hack at her wing. All eyes were on her, even Master Guillaume's. Hands trembling, Laurence strode back out of the pen.

She did not know who started laughing, but the sound was as a lash against her back as she fled back to the tavern so she might hide.

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All was not lost, Laurence learned. One night's labour in the tavern had turned into a way to have a roof over her head and the coppers she was saving up were not meant to get her back to Montfort. Master Guillaume had, while scornful, still informed her that though she was not to be one of his true pupils should she save enough coin she could pay for the right to sit in on his lessons. And she wanted to, for though the test had been ugly the duellist was said to have chosen his students with care. He'd not picked those who butchered the most beasts but those who had struck most ably, most precisely. It had been a test to weed out the fumlbers as much as the faint-hearted, the townsfolk gossiped. Thierry had made the cut, along with three more of the

caravan guards. They made up a significant part of the twelve pupils chosen, so when one day Thierry greeted her loudly by saying, 'ah, but is this not the fool who cut nothing?' the mockery took.

It was not repeated by the people of Souquet, who had become sullenly resentful of the duellist school ever since Lady Ninon leant coin to raise a hall for the duellists even as she still refused to help fund the town militia, but it was how all of Master Guillaume's students had taken to greeting her. Somehow, Laurence came to grasp that mocking her had become one of the bonds that kept their lot together. The lot of them were certainly prone to quarrelling among themselves, and with townsfolk as well. Yet Laurence would not be cowed and so she put her back into the work that saw coppers slowly accumulating in her bag.

Work always came easier to her when it was a fight, and it was a fight she had on her hands in Souquet.

The days and nights passed, somehow both too quick and too slow, and Laurence did not slacken in her training even after gruelling days of work. Nighttime in the stables saw her take up her iron sword and try to mimic forms she'd seen the duellist pupils use during the day, and though it was frustrating she thought she was beginning to grasp some parts. The one-handed drunk she'd helped on her first night disagreed, and often made fun of her from the stall where he had continued to come in to sleep. Laurence had taken to bringing him the scraps of her meal, since he blew all his coin on drink and she'd never seen him eat otherwise. His name, he told her, was Ortega.

"Sounds like a surname," Laurence said.

"It is," the drunk agreed. "Lost the other one."

It was the kind of things drunks said, she figured. She had no idea what the man did during the day, it was like he just went wandering off. Ortega was usually decent enough company, but sometimes his teasing got on her nerves. And one night, after a day where some of the pupils had come at the tavern just so they could drink a single ale and pass an hour ordering to fetch things, she lost her temper when he mocked her guard as being more open than a barn door.

"If you can do better, why don't you show me?" she snarled. "Unless that sword you're lugging about is just rust in a scabbard."

"It's worthless," Ortega shrugged. "And your Master Guillaume, he's all over the place. The stance is Miroir Verdant, those monastery monkings, but he drills his pupils the same way the Sparrow School in Cantal supposedly does."

She started in surprise.

"Were you really a fantassin?" she eagerly asked.

He bore no suns, so he could not be a duellist, but there were others ways to make a living with a blade.

"I fought in battles," Ortega said. "A long time ago. I did not care for it."

His tone had become rougher near the end and Laurence winced in sympathy. He must have been on the bad end of a rout, to become like this. She could not ask him to teach her, not if it was going to get him to drink himself into the grave. So when he offered a few words about how to fix her guard before retreating into his empty stall with a bottle of cheap swill, she did not ask for more. However it was he'd lost his hand, she doubted it'd been pleasant. Instead she spent her days working and her evenings practicing, counting down the days until she could afford to pay for proper lessons. There was some trouble when a young boy disappeared after having gone to fetch water one afternoon, and Laurence heard of it for a week when townsfolk came to vent over drinks.

It was not the first disappearance, she heard. Over the last few years six more children had gone, taken by bandits or animals, and the town was boiling over with anger. People wanted a militia to make the region safer but they needed the coin and permission of Lady Ninon to raise one and she'd denied both. The mayor had tried to convince Master Guillaume to go looking, but he'd refused and it had only embittered the town to the presence of the duelling school. Coin that could have been spent making them all safer instead, folk said. Laurence thought it unfair of the lady to behave this way, but it was not her trouble and she would not go borrowing it.

She would only stay in Souquet until she had learned enough to be taken on as a caravan guard and she could join one to find a better school to study under.

Laurence was only three coppers away from her first lesson when the world went mad. Just after sundown some servants from the estate came running, claiming that Lady Ninon had been murdered by some assassin and that no one was safe. Her guards, they claimed, had gone mad with grief and now knew neither friend nor foe. They'd killed other servants, some of which had family in town. The mayor was furious and called for all able men and women to take up what arms they could, which was trouble. Laurence dipped out of the tavern to go take her things, just in case, but when she went to the stable she found people already there. Three men, including a smiling Thierry who had her bag in his hands and was riffling through it.

"How dare you," Laurence hissed.

One of them looked guilty, but none chastised.

"We heard you've been stealing from patrons," Thierry informed her in a righteous tone. "Looks like it's true."

He was shaking the coppers she'd painstakingly saved up, a smug smile on his face. Laurence shifted. They were large and she was not, all three armed when her iron sword was still in the hay.

"They'll string you all up for thieves," she bit out. "If you don't drop that and-"

"Who will?" Thierry smiled. "Lady Ninon, the corpse? Or a pack of shopkeepers and an idiot mayor? Best you shut up now, Laurence, before our school takes offence to your accusations."

"Could be trouble," one of the others muttered. "All this for coppers?"

"One thing's still true, Thierry," Laurence snarled. "I would still rather fuck the wagon, splinters and all."

Ugly fury streaked across the boy's face and he threw down her coin, reaching for the sword at his hip. Before he could bare it, though, someone stumbled through the stable doors. Ortega, still messy and unshaven and stinking of wine, came to a sudden halt as he took in the situation. He had a slender longsword at his hip, and the same old battered scabbard slung across his back.

"Run," Laurence hissed. "Get help."

"Enough," the largest of the three men snarled, unsheathing his blade. "You, the drunk. Drop to the floor. And you, girl-"

Casually, moving with unearthly lightness, Ortega punched the man in the throat. He dropped like a sack of flour, choking, and it was with calm eyes that the harmless drunk Laurence had befriended considered the other two.

"Take him and get out," Ortega said, tone even.

Not even the slight slurring of the words was enough to entirely unmake the impression that single casual strike had made.

"This isn't over, cripple," Thierry sneered.

The other man, warily, picked up their accomplice.

"I know your type, boy," Ortega snorted. "You'll die young and ugly. Hurry out of here and to that end."

Angry as hissing cats they were, but the duellist pupils still retreated with their moaning friend in tow. In shock, Laurence was staring at the man she'd thought she had pegged.

"What," she began, and stopped.

She had so many questions she was choking on them.

"Ran a little late," Ortega shrugged. "Ninon was a better enchantress than I'd figured, and those guards were mad in the head. Time to leave, girl. Take your things, we're heading east. Heard interesting rumours about a town in Brabant."

"Why do you think I'll go with you?" Laurence replied, falling back to the comfort of defiance.

"Those little shits will beat you and rob you blind," Ortega said. "You know it, I know it."

"I want to learn the sword," she insisted. "And for that-"

"So you'll learn the sword," the one-handed drunk said, tone entirely sober. "I'll teach you to the best of my abilities, I swear it on the Gods Above."

She shivered, for that was not an oath lightly taken. Yet she was not of a nature easily moved.

"Why?" she asked. "Why now, why make the offer? I did nothing but wield a broom and wash dishes for week."

"Because you did not cut frivolously," Ortega said with a smile, "and stayed true to yourself in the days that followed."

Laurence hesitated, then bit her lip and nodded. She shoved back her coin purse into her bag and snatched up her sheathed sword, turning to tell the dr- her teacher now, she supposed, that she was ready to leave. Instead, she caught sight of tall silhouette strolling into the stables. Master Guillaume idly tossed his large hat to the side and offered them a toothy smile. Behind him, crowded near the door, where his twelve pupils. Thierry was among the closest, grinning nastily.

"I hear that you assaulted my pupils while they apprehended a thief," the duellist idly said.

"Liar," Laurence snarled. "You fucking liar."

Ortega cocked his head to the side.

"You're not a fool, so why?" he asked.

"Reputation is a fragile thing," Master Guillaume said. "It must be carefully tended to, lest it wilt."

Laurence's would-be teacher frowned.

"If you bare that blade," Ortega said, "you'll be a man willing to kill the innocent for the sake of reputation."

"What else is worth killing for?" Master Guillaume laughed.

"And you lot?" Ortega asked. "Do none of you balk?"

"Teach them their place, Master," Thierry called out.

Others jeered and laughed, and though some looked uncomfortable none objected.

"So be it," Ortega shrugged. "Name yourself, duellist."

The tall Alamans jolted in surprise, eyeing the cripple with some degree of wariness.

"You have a sun?" he asked.

"I do," Ortega said. "Speak, before your honour wilts along with your sense."

Anger did away with Master Guillaume's hesitation.

"I am Guillaume of Sarcella, and I bear five suns," the duellist said, hand on his sword. "I have studied under Mistress Joannie Sandrault of the Sandrault school and earned all my marks in killing duels."

He sneered.

"And now you, cripple," he said. "So I might have you buried under a name."

"I am Saint Ortega," the one-handed drunk simply said. "I studied under many masters, killed many men. I named my school Lament."

Master Guillaume flushed red with anger or fear, baring his blade without waiting for the beginning.

"Blades out," he screamed at his pupils. "All of you, help me with-"

Laurence froze, a gentle hand being laid atop her head as Ortega smiled down at her.

"Watch closely," he said. "And listen. Try to hear the Breath."

He unsheathed his sword, then, and moved. As if bespelled, Laurence did not move a hair. Her eyes were wide, her breath so distant it did not feel as her own. She felt Ortega – who had named himself Saint, those hallowed few who stood beyond even the

tenth sun – move before his limbs did, a smooth and lazy river that swept forward. Over the span of fifteen breaths, thirteen men were killed with a single stroke each.

Laurence de Montfort had found herself a teacher at last.

—

They'd fled under cover of dark, hitting the road east. To Laurence's displeasure, the drunkenness had not been playacting – when they stopped, it was to drink in taverns or buy drinks from taverns. Ortega, who refused her the right to call him a saint, spent coin on drink freely but was stingy with lodgings and food. Still, even though they often ate slop Laurence never went to bed with an empty belly.

"Why are we headed to Brabant?" she asked. "What's there?"

"A beautiful man whose voice bewitches all who hear it," Ortega said. "I believe him one of the fae, slipped out of Arcadia and making sport of mortals. They say he sows discord for amusement, ordering families to fight for his love while he holds courts with animals in the woods."

"Fairies aren't real," Laurence flatly told him.

"They aren't?" Ortega asked, sounding pleased. "Lovely to hear. I expect I'll be getting my name back any day now, then."

Laurence gaped at him, for he seemed entirely serious, but aside from the jibe he gave her nothing when she pressed. Instead he began to train her, which she'd been awaiting eagerly. Only he did not teach her guards or stances, but instead the 'proper way to walk'. And when she failed to do as he did, he threw pinecones at her.

"Duels are won and lost on distance," Ortega said. "And you are, again, *dead*."

Laurence was beginning to despise pinecones. But she was not a quitter, and she kept at it. And though he was always drunk, the few times he'd sparred with her she'd not come even *remotely* close to landing a blow. She'd noticed one detail, though.

"Why do you always use the same sword?" Laurence asked. "The plain steel one."

"Did I not tell you the other one is worthless?" Ortega smiled.

"You say a lot of things that are only true in a twisty way," she frankly replied.

He laughed.

"It is worthless to me, though I paid a great deal for it," Ortega conceded. "I keep it with me only so that I might one day finish a conversation."

"So you're not going to teach me a two-sword style," Laurence muttered. "Good to know. So when am I going to meet your other students?"

"My other students?" he repeated, sounding surprised.

"You said you had a school," Laurence reminded him. "Called it 'Lament'."

He laughed, belly-deep and genuinely delighted.

"My dear," Ortega said, "you are half this school, and speak with the other."

She grimaced. So half the school was drunkards, then.

"I thought schools were supposed to have lots of people," she said.

"Most do," Ortega agreed. "But I was, in my youth, known as the lone swordsman."

Laurence almost mocked the shitty sobriquet, until she felt the way the world shivered at the words. No, he'd not been the lone swordsman. He'd been the *Lone Swordsman*. Chosen. Ortega had been of the Chosen, once upon a time. Awe almost still her tongue. Almost but not quite.

"Was," she said. "No longer?"

"Now I am a drunk," Ortega grinned, raising a bottle. "Much better, in my opinion. But it is enough of me, my dear. Close your eyes, we will try for the Breath again."

"Again?" Laurence whined. "It never works."

"You felt the shiver when I spoke the Choosing, yes?" Ortega smiled. "You are not deaf, then, simply obstinate. We will break through your block."

She wore the eyecloth and tried to feel what was in front of her, but to no avail. She bruised her forehead on an oak tree. Master Ortega said that hearing the Breath was what separated wheat from chaff, that no one could become a Saint without it, but Laurence simply could not. She thought perhaps she had on that first night, when she'd *felt* him move before he did as he cut down those men, but not since. The failure was frustrating.

"You cannot force it," Ortega chided her.

Their campfire was warm and the stars bright above them. It would have been a beautiful night, if not for the anger in her belly.

"What's it even supposed to *be*?" Laurence bit out.

"The breath of the world," he replied, suddenly serious.

"Everything breathes, Laurence. Most of us stumble through Creation blindly, but for the few who can listen? It is... beyond what words can explain. As if you suddenly cease to move against the current of the river and instead move with it."

The simple reverence in the way he spoke gutted her frustration.

"How did you do it?" she asked. "Learn how to listen?"

"I tried many ways," Ortega said. "I was young and skilled and thought I could force understanding. I bargained to learn the sword under the Prince of Nightfall, at great cost, but it was not enough. I thought perhaps an artefact would allow me to surpass myself, but it was utter failure – and that debt is yet unpaid. In the end, Laurence, I learned to listen after I buried my father."

She clenched her fist.

"Grief?" she roughly asked.

"In a way," Ortega smiled. "I drank myself unconscious after, and in the moment just before I fell unconscious I heard... everything. As if a veil had been lifted."

Laurence's eyes moved to the bottle in his hand, horrified.

"My body is too loud, you see," he said. "I need something to silence it, and only then can I... drift with the current."

"I don't even like wine," Laurence confessed.

"It is a different path for everyone," Ortega dismissed. "You will find your own, my dear. There can be no gain in trying to fit your boots to my footsteps."

And on they went, following the road wherever it took them. In Brabant they slew the fae, Laurence holding back a thrall while her teacher tore through its veils and took its head, and from there they moved south. In Aisne they fought a tax collector who turned into a wolf at night and ate travellers, in Bayeux they broke a curse that made maidens drink the blood of their beloved. In Orne they took the head of a lord who raped young men and had them hung as thieves afterwards.

"He wasn't magic," Laurence quietly said as they fled afterwards. "Not like the others. Nothing *made* him like that."

"He made himself like that," Ortega replied. "There are three enemies with which no truce can be had, Laurence: time, love and evil. Do not forget that. The only one of these that can be struck down we must, wherever we go."

For two years they followed the road, and with every day Laurence felt herself... sharpen. As if the travelling was whittling away at her, taking away the impurities. She was a fine sword now, good enough to shame even two-sun duellists in display duels, but it was not enough. Master Ortega kept trying to teach her how to hear the Breath, and she kept failing. They tried everything. She was put under a spell that took all her senses away from her, she was made to drink a brew that gave her strange and wondrous dreams, she was made to fight nine duellists in a row – and there almost touched it, she felt, but not quite – and twice she ran until she fell unconscious.

Nothing.

"These are not failures," Master Ortega insisted. "You learn the limits of yourself. The broader your mind, the broader your sword."

Laurence agreed, of course, but knew better in the deep of her own mind. She must try harder. Yet in the month just past their second year together, as the first winter snows began to near, Master Ortega told her that they must head to Iserre.

"Why?" Laurence asked. "That rumour about the manticore was from Aquitan, by the lakes."

"I have a debt I must settle," Ortega softly smiled. "It will be my fiftieth nameday soon, you see."

"Fae?" Laurence asked, hand dropping to her sword.

She would not let the creatures take her teacher from her, no matter what bargain had been struck.

"Oh no," Saint Ortega smiled. "Something altogether more dangerous. She is known as the Ranger."

Beatification II

"To fear death is to grant it power over you. To welcome it as an old friend is to escape the shackles forced on you at birth."

– Irmingard Fenne, the Bloody Sword

Laurence had only known the road for two years, and yet already she could conceive of no other way to live. It seemed a distant thing, the town she had come from. Montfort might as well be in another world entirely. These days she found an urge began to

itch if they even stayed in the same town for too long, as if slowing burned at the soles of her feet. Yet this journey of theirs, it was making her restless in another way entirely. Her teacher had said that they were travelling to Iserre to meet an old foe of his, the Ranger, but not why. Laurence was not one to let questions go unasked, though, so she pressed every time they made camp.

"Is it because she is your lover?" the young girl bluntly asked.

Men did *stupid* things, when cocks got involved. Sometimes stupid in a good way, but usually not. Saint Ortega, ten-sun duellist and sole master of the Lament school, choked on his bottle of swill as he began hacking out a wet laugh.

"Gods forbid," Ortega finally got out. "She is a woman besides, Laurence. My tastes run otherwise."

She'd not so much as guessed. He'd never shown much interest in anyone, really, though Laurence suspected some of that had to do with the amount he drank. It'd always been too much, but since they had begun their journey south he was as a one-man brewery.

"Then why go at all?" Laurence asked. "Never seen you answer to anyone before."

Ortega wiped his face, sparse beard still dripping with wine.

"Nor will you ever," the Saint said, the calm sound of his voice beyond boasting. "There is simply a conversation waiting in Iserre that I wish to finish."

Laurence's eyes narrowed.

"You said something just like that, when I asked you about the sword," she accused.

Not the slender longsword he used, but the other one. The beaten-up scabbard and ratty leather-wrapped hilt he carried around on his back but she had never once seen him draw.

"I'd hoped you forgot," Ortega casually admitted.

Laurence of Montfort really wasn't the kind of girl to ever forget anything, so the joke was on him. Still, he was her teacher. Her master. Respect was due, even if he insisted on being a drunken vagrant.

"I know I'm a student," Laurence said. "That I don't get to make demands. But it doesn't feel like our other journeys, this one."

If he still drew a line after that, she would find her silence. She owed too much to do otherwise. The older man sighed, tucking the half-empty bottle into the crook of his handleless arm. He went

groping behind him, into the grass, and in the moment that followed the beaten-up sword was on his lap. The bottle went down into the grass, sloppily corked, and Ortega considered her seriously.

"You are my student," the older man said. "So I will show you this, once, and tell you its tale. But no more than that."

Laurence gravely nodded. He unsheathed the sword, slowly, and to her surprise and fascination it was no wreck. It was the finest longsword she had ever seen, its steel pale as milk and perfectly smooth. There was no guard, but peeking out from under leather wrap was a grip made of something that looked like bone.

"This blade," Saint Ortega told her, "is known as Sublevacion. In the legends of my people, it is known as the Sword of Rebellion. The tales claim it was forged by Fortun Arles himself, from the bones of a great giant he slew before leading his kin into rebellion against the Gigantes. It will never grow dull nor break so long as its wielder does not lose will, and there is not a thing in Creation it cannot cut. Be it magic or Light, all knows its bite."

"I've never heard of it," Laurence admitted.

"It has been lost for centuries," Ortega said. "And so the legend it hardly known beyond my people. But many a *real* – and later prince – in the south have claimed to have found in years past. There are still many who believe wielding Sublevacion is a mandate to lead all the peoples that were once the Arlesens Confederation."

A king's sword, she thought. So what was he doing, dragging it around like a lump of wood?

"How did you come to wield such a blade?" she asked.

"I went looking for it," Ortega laughed. "When I was a young man, the Lone Swordsman still. It is a long story, and grim in many ways, but I sill simply say that my first attempt to retrieve it from the deepest depths of the Brocelian was a hard defeat."

Laurence could not quite believe him, even though she knew it must be true. She had never seen her master defeated, not even once. Most of the time he did not even take the fights seriously.

"Yet I believed I needed it, that having it would make me the finest swordsman alive," the older man said, pulling deep at his wine. "That it would let me hear the Breath at last. So I made a bargain with a most dangerous woman for her help."

"Ranger," Laurence whispered.

He nodded.

"And the repayment of that favour," Ortega said, "is to come on my fiftieth nameday. I am many things, Laurence, but above them all I am a man of my word."

She clenched her fingers. Perhaps it would not be wise, to cross a woman sounding as dangerous as this Damned was, but she disliked the thought of giving in to Evil so easily.

"You must be too," Ortega gently told her. "Else what clouds you will cloud your blade as well. Steel has no patience for liars, my dear."

He polished off the last of the bottle and tossed it behind him, sheathing the sword. Laurence had found it hard not to stare at the blade. It was, she thought, the single most beautiful thing she had ever seen. But she had asked as much as she dared, and so the conversation ended. They moved deep into Iserre as the days passed and winter came knocking at the door, to the eastern reaches that bordered the Waning Woods. It was wild lands here, little like the tame and wealthy places that the House of Milenan ruled over closer to Lake Artoise. They found a pretty grove away from the road where there was little to hunt but many chestnuts to roast and made camp there.

Ortega drilled her relentlessly, harder than he ever had before. Thrice Laurence thought she'd been about to die to his blade before he finally deflated and ceased sparring entirely.

"I had thought fear might undo your block," he admitted. "Yet it seems not. It is no worry, Laurence, no failure. Yours is simply to be a winding road."

For all his reassurances, she could not help but feel she'd let him down. She sulked for most a day before returning to camp, finding him seated in the afternoon chill by the fire. It had snowed for two days, lightly but enough to blanket the world in pale, and now after a quiet morning it was beginning to snow again. Her teacher looked serene in the dappled evening light. His haggard green coat was pulled tight around him, close enough Laurence would not have known him to be missing a hand, and though he had a flask of liquor in hand he was smiling softly as he watched the snowflakes drift through the woods. The beard and long matted hair leant him a noble mien, if you didn't look too closely.

He made for a striking enough sight that Laurence hesitated for a moment, long enough for someone else to step into their small clearing.

A woman, tall and slender. Black of hair and almost golden-skinned, but for all the grace of her movements she was barely

better dressed than Ortega – tanned leathers and a brown cloak, a vest over a shirt of silver mail. She had two short swords at her hips and a longbow on her back, a side quiver hanging off her belt. The Ranger barely left footsteps in the snow as she walked, as if somehow she'd become light as air. Laurence's teacher glanced at her, unsurprised, and smiled. He raised his flask, which drew a light laugh out of the stranger.

"Are you offering?" she asked.

"I've drinks enough for two," Ortega smiled.

More like two hundred, Laurence uncharitably thought. Her feet shifted, and though no branch cracked the Ranger glanced in her direction before cocking a brow.

"Not so Lone anymore," the Ranger said.

"Days pass," Ortega shrugged. "You might say I am now Drunk instead."

Laurence swallowed a gasp. Gods, how had she not seen it? He had claimed to no longer be the Lone Swordsman, but he had never claimed to have ceased being of the Chosen.

"You've gotten interesting," the Ranger noted, then looked Laurence's way. "Stop hiding, little mouse. No point to it."

"I'm not a mouse," Laurence growled, boldly coming out. "And I wasn't hiding."

The Damned looked faintly amused, but after a cursory glance stopped paying attention to her. Not wanting to shame her teacher, Laurence went so stand behind him properly. Ortega smiled at her, then tossed the flask at the Ranger. She pulled at it, letting out a pleased little sigh afterwards.

"Brandy?"

"From up north," Ortega said. "No one makes it quite like the Bruseni."

He rolled his shoulders, afterwards, and it parted his cloak slightly. Enough that, for the first time, his missing hand was revealed. The Ranger stilled, flask still in hand.

"Fought one of the Slayer's Blood near the Brocelian," Ortega idly said. "Didn't see the sword hook coming."

The Ranger sighed, then tossed him back the flask. He caught it easily.

"Sometimes the bargains don't bear fruit," she said. "We'll call it done, then."

Hard, cold anger flashed across Ortega's face.

"Repeat that insult," he said, "and we'll be fighting for a different reason entirely."

The Ranger did not speak, but the look she gave him was skeptical. Laurence puffed up with anger too, even though she would rather he didn't fight the Damned at all. She felt... dangerous. Like a mountain path on a moonless night, or a swim too far from the shore. The dark-haired man unsheathed the legendary blade on his lap, Sublevacion, and tossed away the sheath. He left the bare blade, perfect and pale, across his lap.

"You asked me once," Ortega said, "what I thought such a blade would do for me."

"You gave me your answer," the Ranger reminded him.

"And now I have another."

Stump and hand went to the flat of the blade, smooth and sure, and the Drunk Swordsman pressed *down*. After a moment of utter stillness the perfect white steel broke, shattered in two, and the halves of a priceless blade of legend fell into the snow.

"Not a thing," Saint Ortega said, meeting the Ranger's eyes evenly.

Slowly, the woman began to smile until it split her face like a scar.

"You have gotten *interesting*," she repeated.

The bow was tossed to the side, and with it the quiver went. Laurence's teacher rose to his feet, taking up his simple steel longsword as the hem of his green coat brushed the snow. He turned to pat her shoulder, smiling.

"Watch," Ortega said. "Listen. Learn."

"I will," Laurence quietly swore.

And when they left here, she would be able to hear the Breath. It was another great gift he was giving her, to be able to see a duel between Chosen and Damned. If she could learn nothing from that, what could she learn at all? Her teacher kept the sword at his hip, sheathed, but offered the Ranger a grandiose sweeping bow that she returned with a laugh.

"Shall we do it properly then?" he asked.

"By all means," the monster smiled.

"I am Saint Ortega," the Drunk Swordsman said. "My school I named Lament. I claim no other honour."

The Damned unsheathed her blades, one after the other.

"I am the Ranger," she simply said. "I hunt those worth hunting. Rejoice, for you qualify."

And then they were moving, without so much as a word. Like ghosts in the falling snow, the Ranger first darting in close but then giving ground when Laurence's teacher nearly took her head off with a blindingly quick unsheathing stroke. The monster was smiling. So was the saint. Back and forth they paced, never leaving the clearing or missing a step. It was the Drunk Swordsman who first drew blood, a cut on her cheek that should have gone through her eye instead, but three passes later she sliced deep into his leg. Yet he was winning, Laurence thought when she could see them at all and not simply a whirl and snow and movement.

The Ranger was quicker and stronger, but her teacher was... she'd never seen anyone move like that before. It was as if his every stumble was blessed by the Gods, sparing him steel or setting him up for a stroke, and even when she disarmed him with a clever trick of blades he drunkenly laughed and speared her belly with the empty sheath before snatching the sword back from the air and smoothly pivoting into another blow. He was winning. The third would be suffered by the Damned, a thrust on her flank that went through the mail, and she let out a little gasp before she laughed.

"Ah," the Ranger said. "*Tricky*. But I have it now."

And she did. First she began to parry the blows she'd once had to avoid, as if she could now see the odd angles her teacher struck by coming, and then it got worse. She began moving just like him, blow for blow, and Ortega was not as skilled defending against it. He took the fourth wound, then the fifth. And as he slowed from the blood, panting but clear-eyed, the Ranger shook herself as if she'd been asleep the whole time. And when they exchanged blows again, she was somehow *better*. Her movements were quicker, the evasions even more closely chained, the timing just a tad more finely picked. And with her own teacher's swordsmanship she slew him.

"Almost nothing to transcend," the Ranger praised, and ran him through.

Laurence did not realize she was screaming until the sound had ripped itself out of her throat, her teacher falling to his legs with a wet gasp. The Damned slid out the short sword and took a single step back, flicking away the blood on the snow and

Laurence ran forward. She knelt by her teacher as he began to topple, smiling faintly as he turned to her.

"Did you?" he rasped.

Never had Laurence felt so ashamed in her life, but all she had heard was grief and fear and the pounding of blood in her ears. She shook her head. But he did not curse her, did not look disappointed even as the light died in his eyes.

"My dear," he said, chin resting against her shoulder. "What a wonder you will be, when you learn to listen."

And he rasped out a long breath, leaning against her. He never breathed in. Eyes stinging, holding her teacher's corpse close, Laurence met the calm gaze of the monster studying her. And the fear was there, still in her, but something hotter burned in her gut. Indignation at what this... thing did, what it was. What it so carelessly took from others for its own obscure purposes.

"I'll kill you for this," Laurence harshly swore. "I'll kill you, one day."

The Ranger smiled, as if pleased.

"Your name?"

"Laurence de Montfort."

"You know my Name, Laurence de Montfort," the Ranger said. "Take your time. Ask for me when you're ready."

The monster laughed as she walked away, vanishing in the snow. All she left behind was her parting words and small footsteps soon filled by the falling snow.

"I'll be waiting."

—

Saint Ortega of the Lament School was buried in a small thicket, his grave marker a slender longsword driven deep in the ground. His only student took to the road with the broken halves of a legend in her pack, wandering wherever the wind took her.

—

It was some months before Laurence realized she was not simply a wanderer but *the* Wanderer.

There had been signs. Odd coincidences. It grew beyond denial when a river bridge broke and she was forced to stay overnight in a town, wandering in just before nightfall and finding herself hosted by the only family willing to take in a stranger — hours

before a crazed fantassin who'd been attacking the townsfolk broke through their door. She took the man's head after a duel, finding him utterly made but an even finer sword for it. Laurence had never given her name, so they called her 'wanderer' instead when giving profuse thanks, and the word felt like a pleasant finger being trailed down her spine. She had been, in her own way, Chosen.

Even the fucking Gods wanted the Ranger dead.

Laurence often let the road guide her, but it was southwards she travelled. She followed rumours of monsters and rogues, slept under trees often and in stables when she could. What little coin she had she won from the people grateful she had stepped between them and danger, as well as the occasional sword trick to entertain children. That got her into trouble with a five-sun duellist who accused her of 'dishonouring her sword', so Laurence de Montfort beat him soundly and marked his face before ripping the embroidered suns out of his tunic. She was the last of the School of Lament, she would not let her teacher's name die by staying unranked. Her limbs were quick and sure now, her stride like a cat and her senses sharp, but the Wanderer did not go hunting for Damned. Not yet.

First she had to see about getting Sublevacion forged again. Her master had snapped the legendary blade before duelling his foe, but Laurence would not make that mistake. Ortega had been... gallant, in the way that stories told you about. Romantic, in his own cynical way. If there was a speck of romance in Laurence's soul she had yet to find it, so if putting that sword back together would help with her shot at the Ranger it was what she do. Fair play, gallantry? Madness. Someone people just needed killing, it was pointless to make a game of it.

Yet no simple smith would do for the task of forging anew such a sword, Laurence knew, so as she moved southwards she pricked an ear for rumors of Chosen on the discreet end of things. Those that could craft wonders, she'd been made to understand, tended to keep it quiet. Otherwise kings and monsters got a little too interested. One lead was more promising than the others, near the border between Creusens and Aequitan, and she followed it to the end. What she found was... not what she'd wanted. Bandits and criminals had gone missing from nearby towns, but not to the kind of hard-handed justice that her teacher had introduced her to.

They were being kept in a lair, in cells. Being experiment on. Laurence had not set out to find a Damned, but she had anyway.

It was no epic fight between Good and Evil. She killed his two mercenary guards over the length of three passes, then kicked down the door to his quarters. It was just a boy, she found. Sixteen, seventeen? The Salutory Alchemist, he said he was. And going through his lab, she saw that while his basement was a dark

thing he was trying to make good out of dark gifts. Antidotes and plague cures, potions that could mend wounds even Light could not. And still she came to stand over him, sword in hand.

"They warned me it would end like this," the Salutory Alchemist rasped out, resigned.

His eyes were red. He'd wept and tried to hide it when she returned.

"Go on, then," he said. "Get it over with."

There were three enemies no truce could be had with, she'd been taught. Time, love and evil. Only one of these could be cut, and so it must be wherever it was found, but still Laurence hesitated. She thought of small town to the north, of the trial she had taken in Souquet and failed. The willingness to cut, Master Guillaume had demanded of them. She had refused, that day. Refused to cut chickens and pigs and a stray dog. Was she now to cut a boy instead, murder him in cold blood?

She gave him a black eye instead.

"Give your prisoners to the nearest gaol instead," the Wanderer said. "And from now on you use *animals*, Alchemist. Else I come back for another visit, do you understand me?"

She left him to his promise of doing better, feeling lighter for it, and returned to the road. That first encounter had lifted a veil of sorts, for she began encountering Chosen and Damned afterwards. Laurence travelled the south, going from one evil to another. Always there was some corpse, some monster, some criminal that no one else could touch. And though she kept to the ways that Ortega had taught her, she lent her blade to more than that. She helped the Unconquered Champion put down the flock of rampaging wyverns that were ravaging Orense, then battled the Wicked Binder at his side. When the Exarch of Penthes sent the Myrmidon to hunt down the daughter of a disgraced rival in Salia, she duelled him thrice and forced him to withdraw.

In Tenerife she ran into the Drake Knight, a tall stout man by the name of Isodorios, and together they unmasked a merchant lord and warlock trying to start a war with Helike. Three villages were burned by mercenaries, an eerie ritual trying to wake 'the shadow of an ancient dragon' was stopped and in the wake of it all Laurence took her first lover. They parted ways on good terms, a few weeks later, and she returned to her wanderings. Years passed, bringing with them monsters and heroes and always fresh blood on the floor. The Wanderer's legend grew until it outpaced even her feet, her reputation spread far enough that others sought her to fight evil.

Through it all, Laurence de Montfort asked for neither gold nor titled nor songs praising her name. All she wanted for the help she gave was the simplest thing. She'd look the Chosen in the eye and ask a simple thing: *teach me a trick*. She learned the flicker-blade from Isodorios, to strengthen her limbs from the Hunter, to parry arrows from the Knight Errant and fight blind from the Duellist. With every passing season her arsenal grew, but the thing she wanted most still eluded her. Laurence had toppled three official schools and in doing so earned nine suns, but the masters of the trade refused her the tenth: only those who could hear the Breath could claim to be Saints, and she could not.

She settled for second best instead. She sailed to Ashur where the Blacksmith, an exile from Foramen in the Dread Empire, forged anew Sublevacion.

The Wanderer should have known better than to take that as a simple boon. Mere days after the blade was made whole again, she stumbled across a trail of odd tales from eastern Valencis. Strange creatures seen wandering the night, leaving no tracks, and entire villages disappearing without warning. Emptied without a trace. She pursued, for there was the scent of evil to it all, and after a month of chasing fae stories and a brief diversion to accidentally topple a bandit clan she found what she was looking for: the dead. It had been a mage behind it all, one who'd found fragments of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness. A monster who used spectres to smother entire villages in their sleep and raise them as servants.

The Necromancer was raising an army, for she had ambitions of empire.

It was the most brutal fight Laurence had ever been in. To reach the Necromancer in her fortress in the Brocelian she had to cut her way through an army, then through ghosts and ghouls and monsters as she attacked the keep. Only for the Necromancer to mock her, even as the Wanderer cut through her spells to open her belly with a blow.

"I won't die," the Damned laughed. "*I am made of death, Wanderer.*"

It was no idle boast. Though Laurence broke the army and fortress, the Necromancer was back half a moon later and slaughtering villages again. Laurence caught her on the move, ran her through, but it didn't *stick*. She spoke to priests but they had no answers. A wizard she trusted, though, had a hint: she must have bound her soul to her works, he said. Instead passing on, the soul moved to inhabit another corpse. And it was true. Six times more Laurence slew the Necromancer, but every time she returned in a different corpse. And when the Wanderer came for a seventh, at last her strength failed. It had been an ambush, and

she'd been run through a gauntlet of monsters all night. As dawn slowly approached, the Necromancer came and gloated. The fear had gone out of the Damned a little more with every fruitless death.

"It was amusing, our game, but I tire of it," the Necromancer told her. "I have great works ahead of me and your meddling keeps me from them."

Panting, on her knees, the Wanderer weakly leaned against Sublevacion.

"I am a sword," Laurence of Montfort forced out, "in the hands of the Heavens. You will go no further."

Yes, she thought. That was right. All her life, she had tempered herself into a blade. She had not proved worthy of the tenth sun, of hearing the Breath, so she was no true swordswoman. But a sword, oh she could still be sword.

"You have remarkable talents," the Necromancer said. "I would offer you service, but it would almost be a waste. Would you not agree to a truce, Wanderer? We need not be at odds."

"A truce?" the Wanderer rasped.

"Indeed," the Necromancer replied. "Shall I perhaps take my campaign to Orense instead of Valencis? I will not stray beyond those borders, if you leave my work uninterrupted."

"Do you think it makes a difference," Laurence of Montfort quietly said, "where you butcher innocents?"

The Necromancer sighed.

"And how many of those have you saved, with all your sword-swinging?" the Damned said. "Precious few. What have you achieved save for carving away at their corpses? Innocents die, Wanderer, a thousand a day without Creation ever batting an eye. I give them a purposeful death, at least, as the foundation of a new and better world."

Laurence felt sick, for the Damned was not entirely wrong. How many empty villages had she walked through? Too many. Every corpse she'd cut was someone she had failed to save.

"A truce, Wanderer," the Necromancer gently suggested again. "Orense, yes, and perhaps only one village a month? I am not unwilling to compromise."

It'd be fewer deaths, Laurence knew. Even if the Wanderer now rose to her feet and won it all, toppled the odds, the Damned would be back. It was the sensible thing, to take the deal. It'd save lives. And still, the words would not leave her lips. Laurence de Montfort looked at the Necromancer, tall and hooded

and too pale to be alive, and she saw a hundred foes. Fae and monsters and men, all with a smile and a story and a reason. All with blood at their feet that she had come too late to stop them shedding. A truce? She felt like throwing up. How could there be a truce with people who were at war with all the world, who ate away at Creation like wild dogs tearing a child?

She thought of her teacher, standing in the snow as he was run through. Saint Ortega had lived as himself, never once compromising even in the face of death. And Laurence, Laurence wasn't the same as her old master. She knew that. He'd known that. But she would heed that lesson, now. She would not die as anything less than herself. Slowly, leaning on her sword, she rose to her feet.

"Pointless," the Necromancer sighed. "Wasteful. What can you do, even if you cut me?"

Spectres and corpses advanced, a tide of fang and sword. Laurence took a stumbling step forward. The Damned wasn't wrong. How many times had Laurence cut her, only for the monster to return? And still she stepped forward, light-footed under the stars. The dead came for her but the Wanderer wove through them, a ghost among ghosts, and came with a raised blade for the Necromancer's head. The mage smiled mockingly at her, unmoved.

"Nothing," the Damned said. "You can do nothing."

Laurence laughed.

"I was once a fool," she said, "who cut nothing. Let us see if I am still that fool, at least a little."

And it wouldn't be enough, to just cut her, but Laurence would swing her sword the way she always had. Sublevacion could cut anything, her master had once said, but it'd not been true. There were things you couldn't cut. You needed a stronger hand than that. Not to wound or carve of cleft but to... sever. Yes, Laurence thought even as she raised her hand.

She would swing and sever.

It was a prayer under starlight, a wish whispered to night. Laurence de Montfort swung and Sublevacion sang, passing through flesh and... something more. The Necromancer screamed, screamed in fear, and there was a billowing of black smoke.

Oh, Laurence thought as she dropped to her knees. The dead dropped with her. It'd been only a single note, but she had heard it. Beautiful.

Her soul had whispered, and the word it had whispered was **Sever**.

—

She limped back to Valencis, looking for the Salutory Alchemist. There were wounds on her that would scar badly, if not tended to with potions. He'd moved to the capital during the secant plague and was good about giving potions to Chosen without asking for coin, so it was a touch of luck she'd not been too far. She didn't find him, though. Instead she found guardsmen grabbing a homeless man off the street in the middle of the night. An abduction. And once she began pulling at the threads, the whole rotten city came falling apart.

The Salutory Alchemist had begun experimenting on people again and they were all covering for him. Soldiers, merchants, magistrates, nobles, *priests*. They began hunting her, naming her a murderer, and Laurence was left to wonder how far up it really went. One corpse at a time, pushing through traps and lies, she got to the end of it. The Prince of Valencis himself. The prince of rot and blood, half a corpse and kept alive by potions only one man could make. She dragged him out of his bed. On his own throne, in the dark of night, Laurence beat him bloody until he spat out where the Alchemist was hiding.

Good, she could end it now.

"You laid hands on royalty," the man hissed through broken teeth. "It will be the end of you, Wanderer. I will see to it that—"

Sublevacion swung down, a head went rolling across the marble floor and Laurence became a regicide. She did not look back. The hunt was not over. His lair was beneath the city, through the sewers. She waded through poisons and monsters, but in the end she found him. The trembling, sickly boy that'd become a trembling, sickly man.

"I could make us all immortal," the Salutory Alchemist screamed, scuttling away through a sea of broken glass. "Laurence. Laurence, *please*. I didn't really mean to hurt anyone. A year, a year is all I need and I can make us all—"

She thought, then, of a pale face under starlight. A *truce*, the Necromancer had offered. *Only one village a month*. Evil made orderly, pretending to be civilized. She knew better than to hesitate, now.

"There can be no truce," Laurence de Montfort snarled, "with the Enemy."

Blood splashed. It did not wash out the river already spilled. She had been, as always, too late.

—

"I hear you've been asking for me."

Laurence was soon to be thirty. She had learned what she could from all the teachers she could find and the Breath still eluded her. It was time, she'd decided. Time to settle accounts with the Ranger. Yet before she'd found the Damned, damnation had found her. The woods were quiet in the afternoon gloom, eerily empty of life. The Ranger had made no noise as she approached, wearing a tattered old cloak over her leathers.

"So I have," the Wandered said.

"Are you ready, then, Laurence de Montfort?"

Sublevacion left the sheath with a hiss.

"Try me," Laurence said, baring her teeth.

The cloak whispered as it fell to the ground, the Ranger baring her blades as the two of them fought to be the first to close the distance. The Wanderer pulled out all her tricks, every last thing she'd learned in years of dragging herself from one horror to the next. Isodorios' flicker-blade was the first – her sword rippled then struck as a snake, an application of Choosing-strength that often took an enemy's head before they'd realized they needed to parry.

The Ranger mirrored it perfectly.

"Free Cities," she mused. "Heard you'd visited."

She swept down her sword with impossible strength, scattering leaves and dirt to blind them both. The Ranger matched her fighting blind, then threw in a kick to the stomach. Laurence tasted iron against the roof of her mouth. The Duellist's favourite trick-parry, slapped aside. She lost out in brute strength and reflexes both. She cut a tree and the Ranger cut at her *through* it. One after the other, she emptied every single trick of the trade she'd learned and her enemy contemptuously swatted them aside. The Ranger was growing increasingly irritated.

"Is this it?" the Damned scorned.

"**Sever**," Laurence hissed.

She cut the air, a tree and one of the Ranger's blades with the blow. The Damned sighed, rolling her wrists as she made.

"Even at your best, all you do is cut with blind hate," she said.

Yet there was wariness in her face as she eyed the screaming cut that still hung in the air. Laurence grinned, focusing inwards again as she raised her blade and – the broken blade went through

her stomach, then ripped down. Her fingers fumbled against Sublevacion's hilt, the Ranger ripping it out of her grasp. Laurence fell to her knees. The Damned considered the blade, for a moment, then with wistful look she *snapped* it. The pieces she dropped, casting a look down at the Wanderer as she bled out. The look in those eyes... *Is that all*, it whispered. *Is this the sum of you?* And with one last sight, the Ranger walked away.

Dropping down into the earth, Laurence felt her strength ebb away. More than that. Her Choosing, too, the favour Above had shown her. Nose in the ground, she looked at the two pieces of perfect white steel abandoned before her. Darkness was closing in, a foe she could not defeat. She breathed out raggedly, eyes closed, and in that moment at last she heard it. The Breath. The current of Creation, revealed to her as she began to leave it. Was it the end? It did not matter. It burned in her gut, the callous cruelty she'd seen in the Ranger. That no one would ever call her to account for it. Resolved hardened as she looked at the twice-broken sword – once by a good man and once by an evil woman.

Steel, even steel of legend, always broke. There was only one way through, and in this world or the next, she would see it done. It was not an oath or a promise, not anything less than a decree.

Laurence de Montfort would make herself into a sword that would *destroy all Evil*.

Refuge

"Nothing can ever be repaired. An object broken and mended is so made a different object."

– Melete the Stern, Atalante philosopher

It all began going wrong when Constanza cured Uncle Tomas.

She'd not meant anything by it. Papa had... not been the same since Mama died. And Constanza had learned much at her mother's knee, as much as a girl of eight could of alchemy, so she'd broken into the empty laboratory and spent half the night brewing while Papa slept off the liquor. Uncle Tomas, Papa's older brother who came to check on them everyday, he had this cough. It looked painful and when she'd asked – after he'd called her a cocky little brat in a fond tone, just the way Mama used to – he'd said he couldn't do hard labour because of it. So Constanza gave him the potion when he came the morning after, said it would take care of the cough, and though her uncle was just humouring her he drank every drop.

The morning after when he came back Uncle Tomas wasn't coughing but he didn't look happy: he looked *scared*. He shook awake Papa

and the two of them had a loud argument, though Constanza was sent to her room so she didn't know what about. Papa, that night, did not drink for the first time since Mama had died. She tried to ask what the shouting had been about, but he mussed her hair and told her not to worry.

"Your uncle thinks we should move to a smaller town, but he worries for nothing," Papa said.

"What's he worried about?" Constanza asked.

"Nothing, I told you," Papa smiled, but then he grew serious. "But you have to stay out of your mother's laboratory, *corazon*. It's dangerous."

She didn't dare argue, not when he seemed better now and she might ruin it, so she didn't even though he was being silly. Constanza wasn't in *danger* in there. She felt safest of all in that small, cramped room where she had spent so many hours with her mother. Papa began going back to the shop and it seemed like things would get better, but odd things were happening. Priests, who had avoided the house when Mama still lived, visited several times. They always looked angry and asked a lot of questions. Uncle Tomas only looked pained when she asked him about it. And then one day, armed men came to the house and when Papa tried to resist they broke his arm. Constanza screamed and struggled, but they wrapped her in a bag and she fell unconscious.

She woke up in a beautiful room, her father nowhere in sight. Some of the thugs were there, but there was also a smiling man whose hair was turning white. She cringed away, even though he looked nice and she'd been put down on a comfortable chair.

"Do you know who I am, child?" the man asked.

She shook her head.

"I am Lord Gutierre," he said. "I rule this town and some of the lands around it. I apologize for how roughly you were brought before me, my men... misunderstood my intentions."

She bit her lip. It sounded fake to her, but her parents had always said to be wary of nobles. They were dangerous. Constanza nodded like she understood even though it was a lie.

"I am told, young Constanza, that you brewed a potion that cured your uncle's cough," Lord Gutierre said.

She nodded. His eyes turned cold.

"Use your words, girl," Lord Gutierre snapped.

She flinched.

"I did," she forced out.

"Good," the lord smiled. "You do not understand quite what you did, child. Your uncle, he was not sick in a common way. He was born with it, so the priests could not cure his ill. Your potion did something Light could not. Did you learn this recipe from your mother?"

Constanza shook her head.

"I made it up," she admitted, then bit her lip. "I used other recipes to put it together but I didn't learn it from a book."

The man was smiling widely, but it did not look friendly at all.

"What a miraculous child you are," Lord Gutierre chuckled. "My own prodigious concocter."

He rose to his feet.

"You'll be staying in my mansion with your father," the lord said. "Your possessions will be fetched."

"What do you want from us?" Constanza asked.

"Potions," Lord Gutierre smiled.

He wasn't lying, but that didn't make it better. She got books, those not even Mama had owned, and all the ingredients she asked for. But she had to make whatever Lord Gutierre asked, or she would not be allowed to see Papa. First he asked for little things, some way to turn his hair black again without dye or to remove a scar. Then it grew bigger. A cure for face creases, something that would keep men... vigorous, perfume that made people like you and eventually a poison that made death look like a spring fever. Constanza pretended she couldn't make the last one, but it was a lie. Even if she hated the lord she loved the challengers, and with every success it was growing *easier*.

He had her beaten for her 'failure'. That same night her door was opened and though she was terrified for a moment, it was Papa that came in. He told her to get dressed and they fled through the mansion's backdoor. Outside waited Uncle Tomas and his family, on a large wagon pulled by two horses. They fled town in the night, but things didn't get better. Lord Gutierre sent men after them but others began to hunt the families too. Their pursuers had drawn attention to them and now other lords looked for the wagon. Worse, too: some men working for the Royal Conjurer of Helike and a magistrate in the service of the Princess of Tenerife. They travelled east, towards the Waning Woods, and in the end it was bandits that caught them.

The ambush hit everyone save for Constanza and her cousin Jafet in the first volley. Some men began looting the wagon, as she and her cousin ran. An arrow took Jafet in the back just as they reached the edge of the woods and Constanza was just too slow dragging him. She left him behind, laughing bandits coming after her. There was a fire ahead, the young girl saw. Someone sitting by it, looking at the slaughter through an opening between trees. She ran towards it, tripping on a root and falling to the feet of slender woman with strange skin and smiling eyes. The bandits followed, one letting out a whistle.

"Lucky night," he said. "Two for one."

The woman by the fire seemed amused, ignoring the killers and turning to look at Constanza.

"And who would you be, little Named?"

"I'm not Named," she denied.

"Hey," the same bandit as earlier said, "I was talkin' to-"

There was a spurt of blood and his head went flying.

"Don't interrupt me," the stranger said. "What do you do, child?"

The other man bandit backed away, but he was already calling for help. Constanza worried her lip.

"I make a, I..." she stumbled, then a knot came undone in her belly.

The words came naturally to her, along with a shiver.

"I'm a concocter."

"Concocter," the stranger mulled.

"Please," Constanza said. "Please help my family. They're-"

"Dead, except for the boy," the woman said. "The last man in the cart just bled out."

She met the stranger's eyes.

"Could you have stopped it?"

"Yes."

Anger surged, but she was powerless. A nothing hunted by many.

"Can you protect me?" Constanza asked.

The woman considered that.

"I have been thinking of settling down," she mused. "Somewhere in the Woods. So I suppose I could."

Left unspoken was a question: why should I? The stranger was not moved to protect others, else Constanza's family would still be alive.

"I'll work for you," she said.

"I have no use for subordinates," the stranger said, then snorted. "Though I suppose I *could* use a pupil."

"Then I'll be that," Constanza swore. "Until I no longer need you."

The woman smiled for the first time that night.

"Your name?"

You did not save them, Constanza thought. You get nothing from me, save what you have bought.

"Concocter," she said, and the monster laughed.

—

The Brocelian loomed ahead, dark and deep and full of terrors. Alexis backed away from Elderman Xavier as he approached. He looked at her with irritating.

"Don't blame me, girl, blame the Gods," Elderman Xavier said. "You drew the lot, your fate is in their hands."

Already they had painted her face silver and rubbed chalk powder into her clothes, but now the old man pressed the last part of it into her hands: a shoddy hunting bow painted silver, along with eight arrows. Behind the elderman the rest of the villagers stood with torches and spears, waiting for the hunt to begin. None looked pleased, but this was old ritual. Their ancestors had brought it from Atalante with them, though Alexis' father had said it'd grown more savage out here in the west. The Brocelian drew out the best and worst of men.

"You know the rules," Elderman Xavier said. "You have to keep going deeper until dawn. If you turn back before that we'll have to kill you, the Gods will take offence otherwise. After dawn you can return, Alexis, but only then."

"They always die," Alexis bitterly said. "Father said it's just a blood sacrifice, sending a girl into the woods for monsters to eat so that the crops grow better, that you're all—"

The slap rang against her cheek and but she bit down on the whimper, gritting her teeth. The elderman glared down at her.

"If your father had been less of a fool, he wouldn't have gotten himself killed playing fantassin and you wouldn't have had to draw," Elderman Xavier said. "You've had enough kindnesses from the village, you and your mother. Now you whine when the village asks in turn? I'll not have it."

"I hope you all fucking starve," Alexis hissed, "every last one of you."

And then she ran into the woods. It was better than getting slapped again. The villagers shouted angrily, because she hadn't stayed and played out the play they'd made her learn the lines to, but burn them all. Torches followed her as she ran into the dark but they wouldn't go far. Everyone was scared of what prowled the Brocelian Forest at night, they wouldn't dare wander out of sight of the fields. She wanted to stay just out of their sight, maybe find a hiding place to sleep in and pretend she'd done their stupid ritual come dawn, but there were... things moving above in the trees. It was moving slowly, coiling around the branches, but it looked *large*. Heart pounding in fear, clutching her useless bow and stupid arrows, she began to run deeper in. Deeper into the nightmare.

It was like there was something about her scent that was drawing monsters to her. Things crawled and flew and ran, wolves larger as horses and little critters chittering false promises in eerie voices. Alexis ran through the dark woods, knees bleeding from where she had fallen and shivering in cold from when she had jumped into a river to escape a massive snake. Her clothes were torn and something that looked like a fox but with malevolent red eyes had clawed her side – the wound was bleeding black, ugly and painful – but she forced herself to keep moving. If she stopped, even for a moment, they would catch up to her. She had to keep running through the nightmare until she reached dawn.

And as the moon began to descend, she began to think she might have. The monsters weren't following her anymore. She'd gone through another river and fallen down a rocky slope – her cheek was bruised and she had a black eye – but she couldn't hear anything behind her anymore. She slowed, risking a look back, and there was nothing. Nothing at all, she finally realized. The woods were eerily silent. Stumbling forward, Alexis found a clearing where tall raised stones stood under moonlight. Instinct told her to stay clear of them and she was glad to follow it. They felt... sad. So deeply sad someone might drown in it. The sensation distracted her long enough she didn't hear the breathing until it was close.

Something massive stepped out from between the trees. Tall as two men and bristling with anger, the monster looked like a boar. Its tusks were pale, but touched with red: it had killed tonight, and its cruel eyes said it would again. That was why the monsters had

stopped, Alexis thought. Something that even they feared waited ahead. She tried to flee back the way she'd come, but the boar was so large there could be no contest. It broke through trees as she ran back up the rocky slope she'd hurt herself slipping on, but her heart seized in her throat as she saw what waited ahead. By the river, rows and rows of small creatures were waiting with cruel pale smiles.

"Safe, safe," they chattered. "Come, come."

"Fuck," Alexis wept.

Was this how she died? Devoured by scavengers or gore by a boar? At the bottom of the slope the boar was waiting for her, huffing mockingly. Alexis has run for so long and now she was just going to die having done nothing?

"No," she hissed. "No. You want me, you fucking animals? Come and *earn it*."

It was a shoddy bow but it was strung, and she nocked the arrow. The boar let out a loud porcine screech but she loosed an arrow, blindly and in a panic. It sunk into an eye in a streak of silver – how, if the arrows weren't painted? – but the monster only grew furious, smashing rocks as if it meant to destroy the very slope she stood on. Alexis let out a sobbing breath, but it got caught in her throat when a hand was laid on her shoulder. A woman was standing besides her, lovely and cold in the light of the moon.

"So you're why they're so riled up," the stranger said.

"I," Alexis choked. "You- *who are you?*"

The question was ignored, the woman withdrawing the hand and looking her up and down.

"Who are you meant to be?" she asked.

Alexis swallowed. The tone had been calm, but something in it warned against refusing to answer the question.

"The silver huntress," she said, "who founded the city of-"

"-Atalante by hunting all the monsters that lived there over a single night," the stranger finished, sounding amused. "It has been a *whilesince* I've seen this ritual. And longer since it's been anything but a harvest fair."

"It still is," Alexis tiredly said. "They sent me because the crops have been getting worse for years."

Below them the monster screeched but somehow she still felt calm.

"What they send you for is never as important as they think," the woman said. "It's what you do with it that matters. And what is it you're going to do, child? Survive the night and return to them?"

"No," Alexis snarled. "Fuck them. I'll make my own way."

The stranger considered her. Stones shook and shattered. The boar would soon be upon them.

"There is a way," the woman said. "For you to be the victor of this hunt. To kill your beast."

"And you'll teach me?" Alexis asked, hope stuck in her throat.

"It would make you my pupil," the woman said.

"Then I'll be that," Alexis replied, fingers tight around her silver bow.

The stranger smiled.

—

Lysander was a slave.

He'd not been born one. He had his feckless mother to thank for that, who'd gotten them all so deeply in debt to a magister that the entire family had been forced to sell themselves into slavery to avoid execution. Lysander didn't hold much of a grudge for that, in truth. Hardly seemed to be a point when he'd seen her fed to a ravenous chimera. His father and siblings had taken it badly, two speaking unwisely enough they got sent to the fighting pits for it, but Lysander's own silence had seen Magister Laskaris take a shine to him. Not so much that the man had refrained from what he must consider a jest at the boy's expense, however: Lysander was now tending to the same beasts that had eaten his mother.

His sisters had been made servants instead, which was a position both lesser and safer. Being one of the slaves who tended to the beasts of the Menagerie was a prestigious position, for it gave rights that slaves in other stations could only dream of, but that came at a cost. Usually, at least on slave a sennight was eaten by one of the more aggressive beasts trying to either feed or wash it. Being the youngest attendant and completely without allies, Lysander found himself given the most dangerous of the assignments repeatedly: the chimeras, the fae, the Praesi tigers and worst of all the drake.

Old Beggar, so named for the white markings that made him look like he had white beard and hair and his tendency to ask for food even moments after being fed, was the single most vicious

creature in all of the Menagerie. It killed on a whim, not just to eat, and whatever sorceries the magisters had used on it to let it survive so far from Levant had made it double in size. It had to be fed five times a day, three if it was a fighting one, and the latter were the days that got people killed. Old Beggar was not above venting its frustrations by impaling servants come to wash its scales before the fight. Which was why, for ten weeks in a row, Lysander was given that assignment.

The first time he had, he'd thought he was going to die. The drake was furious before he ever entered and did not like to be washed besides, so it'd been only moments before he tore through the bucket and slammed Lysander against the wall. Knowing there was nothing he could do, the boy stayed down. Better the poisoned stinger than being ripped apart and eaten still alive. He looked up at the sky through the grid, tiredly waiting for the sting, but it did not come. Old Beggar instead loomed over him, sniffing at his neck. Then it hissed and Lysander, past caring, pushed its head away. The drake chortled, then shuffled away and began wrecking his pen to vent his anger.

Lysander dipped out, picked up another bucket under the baffled stares of his fellow slaves and returned to wash the damned drake. More baffling still, it let him. Magister Laskaris summoned him that night, another few magisters with him. They cast spells on him until a strange-looking woman began to chuckle.

"It's not a special ability," she said. "You broke the child, Anandos. Lack of fear pheromones did the trick, Old Beggar did not recognize him as prey."

Magister Laskaris, fond of his little ironies, made him the designated minder for the drake. Now that'd he proved to have some use, the other slaves began speaking with him. He was not just another corpse-in-waiting, not anymore. Most of it was gossip which he cared little for, but an old woman called Phocia liked to trade his honeycakes for stories of far away. Most of what she knew was from where the beasts of the Menagerie had come from, but that was interesting enough.

"We didn't catch the fae ourselves," Phocia told him one day. "They're from the Waning Woods, originally, but the Magisterium bought them in Mercantis."

"The fat crooks captured a fairy?" Lysander replied, skeptical.

Phocia shook her head.

"There's some mad Named who set up shop in the woods," she said. "Made a settlement she named Refuge near a gate into Arcadia. Calls herself the Lady of the Lake, apparently, and she traded a

few favours with the Consortium so they'd help her set up her place. One of them was capturing a few fae for them."

"What did she make a settlement for?" Lysander asked.

"That's the funny part," Phocia said. "Some sort of school for Named and fools, they say. Apparently she teaches anyone who comes if they've got the stuff. Overheard some magister who was surprised how many people were taking her up on it."

"Named and fools, huh," Lysander murmured.

The seed was planted, though he struggled to burn it out. The idea would not leave him. There were few animals who troubled him in the Menagerie these days, as he'd found he had a knack with them, but it was Old Beggar that he spent most time with. He'd begun to teach the drake tricks when other slaves weren't looking. Picking up a bucket, walking around in a circle, playing dead. A girl called Axia had seen him, once, but pushing her into the pen had taken care of that. The drake was no less vicious than before with people other than him. It wouldn't be enough, though. Old Beggar did not obey the young slave, not really. It was more like indulgence in exchange for treats.

There had to be a way, Lysander thought, to convince the drake to help him. Did it not also want to leave this place, to be freed of chains? Except they weren't the same, not really. Old Beggar was prized, pampered and gloried. Used only to slaughter fighters for the glory of the Magisterium. Lysander was the kind of thing the Magisterium stepped on without noticing while going through its day. Not all slaves were equal. And that, that *angered* him. In a way he'd not felt in years. The pit should be the same for everyone: rats one and all, writhing in the same dark. That even in Below's chamber pot there would be favourites rankled. So when Lysander entered the pen and Old Beggar hissed in displeasure at his nap being interrupted, the boy went still.

He left the pen, abandoning the bucket on the ground, and headed for the stables. There he grabbed an instrument from the racks and returned to the drake. No, Lysander had never learned how to convince others to help him. That was not the lesson of the Menagerie. But down here, he had learned much of the nature of chains. The whip he'd taken trailed against the floor, Old Beggar eyeing it warily. Lysander might not know how to convince this beast, but he knew how to be its master. The whip cracked, the drake screamed, and the same day the two of them broke out of the Menagerie and the entire cursed city hosting it. They flew north.

The Beastmaster figured that if he kept heading that way long enough, he was bound to run into Refuge.

Refuge was a nowhere place, but it was a paradise compared to Mercantis. Indrani might own nothing but clothes on her back, but right now she was still the richest she'd ever been: for the first time in her life she owned *herself*. The Lady had cut her loose not long after bringing her here, indifferent to Indrani's worries.

"There's a shed downhill with tents and supplies that everyone can take from," Ranger said.

Indrani nodded.

"And what are the rules here?" she asked.

The Lady of the Lake flicked her nose.

"Don't piss me off," she said. "What else would there be?"

There must have been maybe a hundred people in Refuge, laid out haphazardly in clumps where people had dug fire pits and raised tents or shacks, and Indrani learned after finally finding the damned supply shed that few of them were friendly- except for the few merchants from Mercantis, which were a little *too* friendly. Indrani kept her hand on her knife whenever she saw them. She wasn't going back to the city, she *wasn't*. She dragged her tent as far away from them as possible, heading out in the direction she'd seen Ranger disappear in. A dozen tents were already there, most with fires of their own. There seemed to be an unspoken division. One side a girl with orange hair was reading a book, another was glaring at everyone while she fletched arrows and two dark-haired boys were talking quietly as they skinned rabbits from a pile. On the other side, a dozen youths from the Free Cities were talking quickly to each other in Aenian-peppered tradertongue.

Hesitating, Indrani pitched her tent on the side with fewer people. Or tried to, at least. For some reason it insisted on staying crooked even when she hammered in the stakes just right. The two girls were laughing at her, but one of the boys rose to his feet with a sigh. Her hand dropped to her knife when he came close.

"No need for that," the boy snorted. "You're the Lady's latest, right? I'm the Nightingale."

Indrani stared blankly at him.

"The famous singer and duellist?" the boy said. "The greatest lover in Procer?"

Indrani looked him up and down, noting the scrawny shoulders, and the stare turned distinctly skeptical.

"Look," the boy sighed, "just call me Raymond. Do you want help with your tent or not?"

"What'd you want in exchange?" Indrani bluntly asked.

"Well, someone learned the lay of this place real quick," Raymond snorted. "Nothing onerous. Just your story, how you got here."

Indrani bit her lip.

"Tell me about the camp too," she said, "and it's a deal."

She insisted he pay up front, which was just good sense, and they sat on a log afterwards after he'd gone for parchment and a quill. Deciding to start simply, Indrani asked about the youths from the Free Cities first.

"Oh, them?" Raymond said with disdain. "Just a few enterprising souls from Helike. Rumour has it one of them is a prince in disguise, but I've my doubts. Now and then we get their like, noble's children who stick it out here a few weeks so they can gloat about surviving the Lady's training when they go back to their cushy homes."

"So the people on our side are different," Indrani said.

"Well spotted," the boy cheerfully said. "Your truly is known as the Nightingale, of course-"

"It sounds like a girl's name," Indrani mused.

"It is a singer's Name," Raymond stiffly insisted. "With a hallowed history, which just happens to have been mostly held by women as a matter of pure coinci-"

"So who're the others?" Indrani cheerfully interrupted.

The boy sighed.

"My good friend over there grimly ignoring us is the Beastmaster," Raymond said. "Taciturn fellow, not much use for us. The glaring beauty over there is the Silver Huntress – the Lady's favourite, but also a girl of... strong opinions. I would not suggest approaching her without reason."

Raymond sounded like someone who'd already got socked in the stomach for trying that, Indrani decided. Her eyes flicked to the last of them, the girl with the wildly coloured hair. Her eyes were the same orange, Indrani realized with the start. Was it fae blood?

"And last is the Concocter," the Nightingale said. "She's good for trades but she doesn't fight. Good person to ask when you're

getting started – she’ll loan you in exchange for a favour down the line.”

“Loan what?”

“Everything,” the boy grinned. “That’s the beauty of this place, Indrani. You get what you earn or what you trade for. What is it you’re good at?”

Singing and dancing, Indrani almost replied. The Three Dances and Seven Tongues they’d been teaching her. But that’d been the slave, not her.

“I’m learning to use a bow,” she said instead.

Raymond hummed.

“I’d advise learning to hunt,” he said. “Fresh meat is always prized. And Lysander will teach you how to skin animals in exchange for the first set of skins, I’d imagine. He did with me.”

She eyed him curiously.

“Why are you here, anyway?” Indrani asked. “You don’t seem like the sort.”

“I am a man of the world, I go where the wind takes me,” the Nightingale airily replied, then wilted under her unimpressed stare.

He cleared his throat.

“I am learning the sword,” Raymond admitted. “It so happens that there are several ten-sun duellists after my life for... various reasons. I will learn all I can from the Lady of the Lake and return to meet my fate when I am a better match for it.”

Indrani considered that.

“Good luck,” she said, and found she meant it.

“Pshaw to luck,” the Nightingale dismissed. “Give me a story instead, yours! I am in dire need of a tale worth penning a song for.”

He was enthusiastic about writing down what she thought was a rather boring story, though he was particularly interested in how Ranger had taken her from the city and the Consortium. He was muttering to himself as he flounced away, disappearing into his tent from which the sounds of a harp being plucked at began to waft. Some of the fires around had food roasting on them but no one seemed inclined to share, so Indrani wandered back down into the larger camp. There were some nuts and berries in the supply

shed, which she helped herself to. It filled her stomach, but she needed to find a way to eat better soon. To her relief, though, the Lady of the Lake emerged from the woods in the afternoon. Raymond had told her Ranger had a hidden mansion somewhere further in where no one but her and her foreign lover who infrequently visited ever went.

The Ranger sat by a fire and everyone gathered to her, Indrani included. It was not a lesson she offered, though, but something more pragmatic.

"Tomorrow I'll lead a hunt," Ranger said. "Southeast, where the hydra's been lairing. Anyone with a bow and a blade can come, but we'll be going to my pace and everyone who falls behind gets left behind."

None even tried to argue with that.

"Do well and you get taught," Ranger said, eyes sweeping everyone. "Same terms as always."

Indrani did not know these terms, but already knew the answer she'd get if she asked about them. What did she have to give in exchange? Not much, that was the trouble, but she needed to go on that hunt. The Lady had barely glanced at her since bringing her to camp and hadn't Indrani just been warned? If she fell behind she would be left behind. She knew better than to try to follow as she was, though. She had a sum of three arrows, a bow with a single string and a knife that hadn't been sharpened in a week. She didn't even have a cloak.

Indrani decided to approach the only other archer she'd seen, the Silver Huntress, and request a loan for a favour. The girl glanced at her and, before she could even speak, tossed one of the arrows she'd just fletched her way. Indrani caught it.

"That's all you get from me," the Silver Huntress said. "Keep at this and the next one will come through my bow."

The Beasthunter – no, Beastmaster wasn't it? – was only slightly more friendly. At his feet a large hound with odd-coloured eyes loyally sat.

"You're not Named," the boy said. "Raymond says you're getting there, but he's been wrong before and I don't trade with... visitors. Come back when you have more than a beggar's bowl to offer."

Swallowing her pride, she went back to Raymond. The Nightingale was apologetic but firm.

"I've only been able to trade supplies for myself," he said. "I can't spare any, Indrani, and I *need* to be on that hunt. It's the way to get sword lessons without relying on the Lady's mood."

He let her use his whetstone out of what she knew to be pity, but she was not in a position to be proud. Her knife would be sharp, at least. At last Indrani followed the advice Raymond had given her and sought the Concocter. With that orange hair, she was hard to miss. Supposedly she had a shack of her own deeper in the woods, for brewing, but she spent much of her time in camp. It was safer here. The other girl closed the book when Indrani approached, face polite but eyes flat.

"You're not a known quantity, so you don't get to trade favours," the Concocter immediately said. "If you need food or advice I'll take labour for it. I've need of firewood and water from the lake."

"It's arrows I want," Indrani admitted. "And a cloak to borrow. Maybe some better boots if there are any to have."

The other girl studied her a moment.

"You're trying to follow on the hunt tomorrow," she said.

Indrani nodded. The book opened again, a sharp sound of dismissal.

"Come back when you've found more reasonable expectations," the Concocter said. "This is a waste of my time."

"I-"

"I said," the Concocter sharply interrupted, "you should leave."

Indrani was itching to punch her in the face, but... No, she thought. But *what*? Indrani had asked what the rules were here, and she'd gotten little more than a shrug. What was stopping her from taking a swing if she wanted to? Always, in Mercantis, there had been something above her. If she stepped out of line she would be beaten or scolded or starved, and so she did not step out of line. Now though, there was nothing except in the way except a question. Back then, when she'd stopped, had the consequences just been an excuse? A lie she told herself about why she didn't fight back. A reason to stay at the bottom, where you didn't have to live with your decisions because you made none.

Indrani breathed out, closed her fist, and punched the Concocter in the face.

She wasn't a great fighter but neither was the other girl and she had surprise on her side. Indrani got bruises and a black eye but

she beat the other girl until she stopped fighting back, bruised and bleeding. Then she limped up somehow feeling the Lady's gaze on her and took the Concocter's stuff. Everything except her clothes, and then she went in the girl's tent and took the potions there too. She went down in the camp and traded books for arrows, a cloak and new pair of boots. The potions she kept, stashing them in her tent. What was the Concocter do, fight her and lose again? She learned the answer to that just after sundown, when two people came into her tent.

The Silver Huntress and the Beastmaster beat her bloody, stopping shy of breaking bone but nothing else, and took everything back. Indrani was left moaning on the floor of her tent, without even the boots she'd traded for. When morning came she could barely move, much less go on the hunt, but somehow Indrani did not despair. She felt, if anything, invigorated. Choices and consequences, huh.

She could get used to living this way.

—

John wasn't sure when it'd begun.

When he'd found the book, he figured. He could barely read but the drawings had been beautiful and one name had drawn his attention: Sir Erland Halls, the Hunter. That was his name too! Halls. His family barely used it anymore, said it was a bad time to make that sort of claim, but it was engraved on the threshold of their house. Erland Halls, he learned, had been a famous knight in the old days. He'd slain great beasts and a dragon, ridden out to the gates of faraway Aksum and dared its rulers to send their worst at him. For a whole day he'd slain one monster after another and returned home unbeaten. He'd died, the book said, killing a villain called the Diabolist during some ancient invasion of the Dread Empire.

John asked his parents about it, but they told him to forget he'd ever seen the book before putting it away in mother's locked office. It just wouldn't leave his mind, though, the story. So he waited until father came back from having a few drinks with friends one night and asked again, all subtle-like.

"We're descended from him," Father proudly said. "From his third son. Our line's never been noble, but blood is blood."

He then grimaced.

"Mind you, Johnny, don't go talking about it," he said. "The Marquess might rule but the Eyes are everywhere. The last thing we need is for them to think we have... sympathies."

That should have been the end of it, but somehow it wasn't. The story stayed with him, like a stone in his boot. John hated cloth and hated selling, which boded ill for the only child of drapiers. Most of his days he spent with other restless youths in the streets, avoiding his lessons, but even that was losing its satisfaction. Wasn't there *more* to do? Sir Erland had been a knight and John couldn't even ride a horse, but that wasn't the part of the story that'd mattered. Erland had been a *hunter*. He'd slain beasts, done deeds worthy of being done. So John decided to try the same.

He was no good with a bow and kind of middling with a sword – Mother thought he might try for a position in the Marquess' service so she encouraged him at first – but John found that he could make a spear sing. All he needed now was something to hunt. Vale was deplorably bereft of anything that could even remotely qualify as an adventure, so he went outside. Hunting game at first, paying huntsmen with his pocket money so they'd take him. When he got good enough he wandered off on his own, looking further and further. Boars. Wolves. Bears.

He brought home the prizes and even got himself tattooed to celebrate. Ancient Levantine tribal marks, the artist assured him. They looked pretty sick. Still, something was missing. The hunts were starting to lose their allure even as he kept at them fervently, until one day he found strange tracks. Like a wolf's but larger, and... erratic. The creature did not avoid villages the way a wolf would. He went off in pursuit, through a thunderstorm and in the wake of what looked like a fight between the Legions and bandits, only to find his quarry: it was a greatwolf, those massive beasts orcish wolf riders used for battle.

This one was alone and half mad with grief, its rider nowhere in sight, and it attacked viciously. The fight was brutal but John prevailed by the skin of his teeth, taking hard wounds over his torso. Strangely enough, though, they weren't paining him all that much. So it was on his feet that he stood when another young man found him in the hills where he'd made camp after skinning his prize. The other boy looked at the dead great wolf angrily, pulling at his furs.

"You did this?"

"I did," John proudly said.

"Why?"

He considered that, for a long moment.

"Because I am a hunter," John finally replied.

Simple but no less true for it. The air shivered with the weight of what he'd just said, and John wondered if his perseverance had

somehow reached the Heavens. The other young man only looked more pissed, before suddenly sighing.

"I wanted it, but you got to it first," he said. "I am the Beastmaster, Hunter."

John had no bloody idea what was going on, so he smiled as amicably as he could.

"A pleasure to meet you, Beastmaster," he said.

The other boy snorted, as if doubting it.

"Slim pickings out here," he said. "You ever been to Refuge?"

This, John Halls decided, had the ring of fate to it.

"Tell me more," the Hunter smiled.

Refuge II

"How many will ever see a devil in their lifetime? Evil first the province of men, for it is we who inflict it to each other."

– Isocrates the Harsh, Atalante preacher

Constanza could have blamed it on the potion, but now she knew better: it'd been her. She'd gotten too comfortable, too soft. When the fat men from Mercantis came waddling into camp, asking about her latest breakthrough, she'd paid it no mind. Lysander had called her work a potion of mind reading, but it wasn't exactly that: it didn't narrow in on thoughts so much as desires, and only did so in a shallow way. You'd be lucky to get anything at all off someone unless they were looking at the very thing or person they desired. She told Merchant Lord Marius as much when he rudely came to her workshop and pestered her about it, but it didn't put him off. He offered to buy her entire stock on the spot.

"No interested," Constanza told him.

He didn't take that well. Had a tantrum, but she bribed Archer with a philtre of warmth to toss him out and break the legs of his impolite bodyguards. A bit of a waste, she realized, since Indrani would likely have done it at half the price. Archer's hate for the Consortium was a lazy one, rarely worked on, but no shallower for that. She'd thought it would be the end of it, but come morning Marius was bothering her again with a fresh set of twice as many bodyguards. Constanza, irritated, went to the Lady about it. Ranger was roasting manticore flesh over a cooking fire, and she deigned to listen until her midday meal was ready to eat.

"So get rid of them," the Lady of the Lake said after the tale was told.

Constanza grit her teeth.

"Is Refuge not your domain?" she said. "Why are we even here, if not for you to protect us?"

The Lady of the Lake glanced at her calmly.

"To learn lessons," Ranger said.

It looked like a dead end, but Constanza would wait. Maybe the great lady would be bothered to actually help out for once. Only the following day Merchant Lord Marius was back with a company's worth of mercenaries and a smug grin.

"You're a fool," Constanza scorned. "You think you can come into Refuge with soldiers and do what you want? She'll kill you all, then head to Mercantis and kill a few more just to make a point."

"It's you who's the fool," Marius laughed. "She's not more above being bribed than anyone else. No one's coming to help you. I'll have your stock, now, and your oath never to sell to another."

She told them off, raising her voice, but no one came. They battered down her door with a bench, ransacked her workshop and the Merchant Lord paged through her notes with idly interest.

"I'll be wanting that water-breathing potion too, the moment you've finished it," he said. "It was a pleasure trading with you, Concocter. I'll be expecting ten mind-reading potions ready in a fortnight, when we return."

He set down a single silver for every potion he'd taken, smiling pleasantly. Constanza grit her teeth, let it go, and the moment she could she ran to camp. She offered trades, very advantageous ones, but no one took her up on it. It was Lysander who explained why.

"The Lady said she'd allow it," Beastmaster said. "No one's willing to go against her."

Constanza choked on her rage. All this just to teach her a lesson? The Merchant Lord and his entourage left that afternoon and life in Refuge seemed as it always had been, until Marius came back two weeks later. And, just like last time, he paid the Lady and she let him rob Constanza. Twice more it happened, until Constanza realized that the Ranger had no intention of stopping. Even when she'd refused to make potions and Marius had ordered the mercenaries to beat her every day until she did, the Lady of the Lake had done nothing. The lessons weren't going to end. No one was going to help her. So Constanza went gathering herbs,

deeper in the Waning Woods than she'd been in years, and shut herself into her workshop.

When Marius and his mercenaries next came, she opened the cauldron in her workshop and hastily drank down the antidote as the poisonous fumes killed everybody else within forty feet.

The antidote had allowed her to avoid death, but not without a price. Her veins were burning and she was short of breath, she could barely move without shaking. And still Constanza dragged herself up and she walked to the Ranger's fire, sitting across the old monster.

"Safety at the mercy of another is not safety," the Lady of the Lake mildly said.

"All that so I'd learn to kill?" Constanza rasped.

"Next time," the Ranger smiled, "they will not press."

And Gods damn her, Constanza thought, but she was right. Mercantis would never trouble her again. And worse still, she'd been right about the rest. When it came down to it, all the bargains she had made, the relations she had struck up, they'd been worth nothing. No one had helped.

She would not forget that, the Concocter decided.

—

By the time they'd crossed from Helikean territory to Nicean, Alexis had grown weary of travelling. It wasn't that she wasn't learning from the Lady, on the contrary: with only the two of them on the road, she'd gotten more spars and tricks out of the Ranger than she'd dared to hope for. It was just that the lands around here were, well, drab. A little further east, where the borders of four cities if the League reached the sides of the same fertile valley, at least the bland plains and fields might have been broken up by some of the raids and squabbles that stories insisted flared up at least once a month. Instead they'd kept further west, to keep to the road and make the quickest journey to Nicae itself.

The Silver Huntress had doubts that the artefact the Lady had left to obtain would be the real deal, though. The people that came from Mercantis to earn the Ranger's favour with useful information usually knew better than to bring her anything untrue, but drow artefacts were so unheard of it was a pretty dubious lead. The Lady wanted to get past the great enchantment that kept her out of the Everdark, though, so she was willing to chase down even the shadiest of rumours. Wasn't Alexis' problem if it didn't pan out, anyway, was it? She'd fought Lysander for

the right to accompany the Lady on the trip so she'd be able to learn from the woman, nothing more.

A few more days and the stretch of the road took them past a few villages and near the fortress town of Alchodon, which was when Alexis got to rue her words. She'd wanted excitement and she got it: smoke was trailing into the sky as swaths of the fields behind them burned, a lumbering column of armed men marching down the road.

"Interested?" the Lady asked.

"I can't make out who it is," Alexis admitted.

"You can," Ranger corrected. "Let me teach you."

She picked up sharpening her eyesight after only three tries, which the Lady praised her for even though archery-based Named tended to find easiest. The column was all soldiers, Alexis saw, men with long spears and polished armour.

"Spears of Stygia," she said, even though no banner was flown. "But what are they here for?"

"Look further behind," Ranger said.

Alexis did, and found horror. Wagons of people, dragged along. Men and women and children, in heavy chains and whipped when they slowed.

"Slaves," the Silver Huntress said. "This is a slave raid."

She turned to look behind her, at the looming walls of Alchodon. Atop the ramparts dozens and dozens of armed men, soldiers of Nicae, were watching the smoke rise into the sky. Watching their people being dragged away like cattle.

"What are they *waiting* for?" Alexis bit out. "They're headed east, Ranger, back towards Stygian territory."

The Lady of the Lake glanced at her, looking almost amused.

"They won't come out."

The Silver Huntress balked.

"That's nonsense," she said. "There's got to be at least as many of them as the Spears in that fortress. Why *wouldn't* they come out?"

"There's talk that Helike is on the rise again," the Lady said. "And Atalante is already busy squabbling with Delos over trade routes, so there'll be no help from there if Helike comes knocking at the door. They're going to let the Stygians go

because the Strategos doesn't want to be stuck in a war with Stygia when the Helikeans start marching."

"But the Stygians are *raiding* them," Alexis said, aghast. "They have a duty. There's laws!"

"Take that as the lesson worth learning from this trip, Alexis," Ranger said. "There is no law, save the tyranny of the strong."

"That's childish," the Silver Huntress growled.

"It's honest," the Lady corrected. "All these laws and treaties and oaths, they all rest on the same foundation: someone is strong enough to enforce them. The moment that's no longer true..."

She glanced at the smoke in the distance.

"Don't get hung up on law," the Lady said. "It means nothing once strength weighs on the balance. My family spent years travelling across Calernia when I was young, hunted by the Emerald Swords. And always princesses and kings swore all in their cities were protected, that gifts would be repaid in kind, that there were laws about this."

The Ranger chuckled.

"How quickly those words wilted, when bodies began hitting the floor," she said.

"That was wrong," Alexis said.

"You can believe that, if you want," the Lady smiled. "Act on it, even. Change the world. But to achieve that-"

"- I'll first have to be strong," the Silver Huntress murmured.

And it rang true, that was the worst of it. Alexis felt a kindling of rage at the thought that even trying to prove the Lady wrong she'd be proving her right. Was there no way? No, the Silver Huntress told herself, that was the wrong way to think.

She just needed to keep fighting, and one day she would win.

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It was hard to predict how the Lady would react to being pressed for tutelage. It changed with her mood, her whim of the moment. Lysander had seen that boldness often paid off, though, so when she asked him why she should bother to teach him how to track manticores he boldly replied.

"I am the strongest of your pupils," the Beastmaster said. "Second only to you."

Neither Archer nor Alexis were his match when he brought his menagerie to bear and the Concocter's path to survival was one of utility, not strength. The Ranger smiled at his words, eyes mild, and his hopes soared.

"Are you now?" she asked.

She rose and left. He knew better than to follow, his stomach tightening with worry. He heard what she'd done only the following morning, when he went to buy a fresh set of flints from a peddler and found himself refused.

"The Lady says you're cut off," the peddler said. "You're a good lad, but not *that* good."

Not a soul in Refuge would trade or gift him so much as a blade of grass. Lysander struggled to understand the lesson, thinking it nothing but petty discipline, until the third day. When he'd finished the last of his dried meat to feed Old Beggar and found there wasn't enough left for Strider, his wolf. He went hunting, but it was barely enough. And when he returned Abraxon, his Atalantian sharpbeak, had grown hungry. The Beastmaster had twelve beasts in his menagerie, the most that he could **Master** without strain, and now that he could no longer trade he found himself buckling under the weight of keeping them fed.

He spent all his days hunting until dark and still barely kept them sated, but the strain was getting to him. When he was made to spar against Indrani, she brutally demolished him in three exchanges. The bruises would only slow him on the hunt, he knew, and what if he'd *broken* something? And so Lysander limped back to the Lady of the Lake, who sat by her fire with a deer skewer in hand and watched him with mild eyes.

"I can't," the Beastmaster admitted. "It's too much."

"Borrowed strength will always turn on you," the Ranger said. "It's one of the first things my mother taught me. Do you begin to understand, now? If your strength relies on others-"

"- it can be stripped from you by them," Lysander quietly finished. "Yes. I understand."

"Good," the Lady said. "You may trade again. Do not forget the lesson."

Lysander wouldn't, he swore it. He would not be had like this twice, be made a fool of.

He would never need anyone ever again.

—

"I have a test for you," the Lady said.

"Yes," Indrani replied.

Ranger looked at her, face fondly amused.

"Not going to ask what it is?"

Archer was not. Last time she'd taken a test she had killed Merchant Lord Septimus and taken the scarf she now wore day and night. She was, if anything, eager for another.

"I'll find out when I need to," Indrani said.

"It might kill you," the Lady warned.

"So could crossing a river," Archer said. "Fear is a shackle."

The Lady looked approving and Indrani hid her pleasure.

"You always say the right things," Ranger said. "Now we find out if you mean them."

Indrani was given a single ivory token and told to bring it to the other side of the Waning Woods. It sounded easy, which probably meant it was a trap. Archer was clever enough to always have a bag prepared in case she needed to leave, though, so when a riding party of fae struck the camp in the middle of the night she wasted no time running. It wasn't the Wild Hunt, she reassured herself, not even the Lady would use them for a lesson. Right? Whoever they were, though, there were brutal and unrelenting. They had hounds with them, great snarling beasts that kept picking up her trail through rivers and even rain, and they were never more than half a day behind.

Archer kept moving. She never slept more than a few hours at a time and rarely at night. When she used up her rations she began eating berries and mushrooms, rarely catching fish. All was eaten cold, a fire would have gotten her kill within the hour. All that stood between her and death was the movement of her legs, so Archer moved. Always forward, never looking back, as the fae pursued her to snatch back the token the Lady had taken from them.

Inexplicably, it became easier. When she learned to let go of what was behind her, of what was ahead of her, there was only a present and the present was... easy. Entertaining, even. There was a surprise around every corner: an enemy or a treasure or a cursed tree. Indrani thought on her feet and kept moving, like a fish in the stream, and found one day that she was *enjoying* this. She was half-dead, exhausted and filthy but she was still having fun. That the fae were never far behind only made it better, forced her to stay sharp.

When she did reach the southern edge of the Waning Woods, Archer almost didn't cross into the plains. It would mean an end to the test, to the game. But she'd been sent here for a reason, so she did. And as the ivory token turned to dust in her fingers, Indrani stood alone with the wind in her hair as before her the sun rose in the distance over Lake Calydon, she found her breath catching in her throat. An end to the journey, a horizon she'd never seen. *Never looking forward or back*, she thought. *Like an arrow in flight*. How many more horizons like this were still out there for her to chase? A hundred, a thousand?

Archer didn't know, but she couldn't wait to find out.

—

John had thought that bringing down a wyvern would please the Lady, but somehow it seemed to be the opposite. He honestly could not understand why.

"How did you kill it?" the Ranger repeated for the second time.

'With my spear' had not been well received, so this time he elaborated some.

"I threw a spear at it," the Hunter said. "It grew angry. So I ran through the woods and its wings got caught in a branch. It broke my second spear when I tried to get its throat, but it knocked me back into a tree rotten on the inside and it toppled down over its body. I finished it off after."

She looked even angrier. Somehow, John dimly felt that now might not be the time to ask for the spear lessons he'd been aiming to get out of her with a wyvern head trophy.

"Head to bed," the Lady of the Lake said. "We're going on a trip tomorrow."

John beamed. He was going to get that training, after all. He must have misread her. He dropped in his bedroll for the deep sleep of the righteously victorious, only to wake up in the middle of the night. He was not, the Hunter immediately noticed, in Refuge anymore. Or in his tent. The trip must have started early, only where was the Ranger? This looked like no part of the Waning Woods he had ever been in, either, and already he could hear creatures creeping closer. He rose from his bedroll but immediately froze: there had been a tinkling sound.

Silver bells had been sown into his pants, tinkling every time he moved. The sound drove the beasts around him wild.

John skewered two lynxes leaping down from above in the two heartbeats that followed, but something larger was approaching. These were not good grounds to fight, the clearing was too small

and he was not on the offensive. So he ran, the silver bells ringing as he did. He ripped a few of them off in a fury after the sound drew an entire flock of sorrow birds, but they were sown deep into his pants. He kept running, the sound drawing ever more great beasts from the depths of the woods as the smaller ones attacked him from every direction. Those bells were going to get him killed, John realized.

He took a risk and ripped off his own pants, wearing little save boots and vest, but with a swallowed scream he realized it wasn't enough. Some of the bells were directly on his skin, glued there with some sort of dark paste. He tried pulling at them, but he was afraid he might rip out a muscle getting them off so he had to give up. John tied up his pants into a makeshift skirt and began running again, his spear slick with blood and his limbs tiring. He began taking wounds, inevitably.

A great cat ripped up his shoulder, a unicorn impaled him less than an inch away from his left lung and a cursed scarab burrowed into his bare knee before he managed to rip the insect out. He was slow and wounded, smelling of blood and fear, and still the damned bells drew more beasts to him. He wouldn't make it back to camp, the Hunter realized. He wasn't even sure he'd gone the right way. He was going to keep running and bleeding and getting slower until a creature finally got him. He was going to die here, alone in the woods with not a soul in sight.

Fear lit a fire in him, but it could not make up for bleeding wounds. A fight with a nesting drake went south on him, his slick spear sliding against the scales, and though he blinded the creature with his bare hands it mauled him before fleeing. He could see his own ribs, looking down. John tried to get up, hearing the tinkling of silver bells, but his vision blackened.

He woke up in his bedroll by a fire, his entire body hurting. He still had traces of his wounds, but they'd been greatly healed. Concocter, he thought, but it was not such a fond thought. It had occurred to him as he ran that the dark paste that'd kept those bells on him had likely been of her making. John saw them even now, a dozen of them placed atop neatly folded clothes. He found the Lady's eyes across the fire.

"Why?" he asked.

"Luck will get you killed," the Ranger said. "Even providence."

"All heroes have it," John pleaded. "I cannot be rid of it."

"I know," she said. "But there is a way around that, Hunter."

A pause, her eyes went to the bells.

"Be good enough it won't matter, when the luck fails."

The Hunter hesitated. They had nearly gotten him killed, these silver devils. This very night. And yet he found his hand closing around one as the Lady of the Lake watched him. Slowly, carefully, he hung it in his hair. One, he thought. Only one. For now.

He would prove them all, the Hunter thought, that he was good enough to be one of them.

—

Five people sat around a fire waiting for the Lady of the Lake.

One wore her silence like an armour, even her face changed so it could not be known.

One clutched her weapons too tight, already leaning into fights she had yet to pick.

One sat away from the flame, seeing in even warmth the shape of the cage.

One smiled a little too sharply, showing teeth always looking to take a bite.

One wore silver bells in his hair and spoke too loud to others who did not listen.

Out in the dark, the Lady of the Lake smiled. They had learned her lessons well.

Fettered

“Good and Evil are a false dichotomy, each claiming to perfect while the other is imperfect. Neither holds any meaning: imperfection was seeded at the heart of Creation before its first breath. The sole lucid decision that can be made understanding this is to overcome that imperfection, to transgress beyond the confines of mortality.”

— Translation of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely attributed to the young Dead King

The sparrow flew up, startled by their approach. Neshamah stared at it as it fled into the blue sky, at its brown wings and hasty flight. His mother laid a gentle hand against his neck.

“It is only a sparrow,” she told him. “Why such a stare?”

He hesitated. He was seven now, and the Conclave had found magic in him. It would have felt too much like whining to speak. As if she could read his mind, his mother tugged at his ear warningly.

"Peleg says I am a sparrow," Neshamah confessed. "That all of father's children are as great beasts, but I am the least of birds."

Also because he was drab and common, but he would not tell her this. His mother's face turned guilty as she freed his ear as he had feared it would. It was not her fault. Mother was a princess, but her kin had been devoured by the Rats not long after Neshamah was born. It had made them the least of the wives and children of King Iakim, for even those of lesser birth had the strength of a family to call on. The two of them had nothing, for rule of the city had passed to another family.

"Even the least of birds is a great thing, Neshamah," she told him. "Have I ever told you the story fetters?"

He shook his head and she smiled. She loved telling stories.

"In the days before Sephirah was thirteen, far before it was made whole again, the entire world was as one," his mother said. "Men and animals spoke the same tongue and the Gods were not hidden away Above and Below but instead where we might see them. Atop the tallest mountain of Creation they made their home and from there ruled us wisely."

It was a beautiful day. The sun was warm but the shade of the oak at their side lessened the sing. The breeze was warm and the whole world looked to be a paradise of green. The gardens of Keter were like none other. His mother gently stroked his hair.

"But one day a king rose among men," she said. "And he was burning with ambition. He sought to be the equal of the Gods, to rule among them from atop the mountain. And so he went among the world, speaking whispers, and turned men and beasts to his belief. All would rule as gods, he promised, if they built stairs that could reach atop the mountain."

Neshamah was young but he already knew what happened to those who thought to equal the Gods.

"The king turned all men and beasts to his purpose," his mother said, "save one for the one. Sipo he was named, the Father of Birds, and the king mocked him. Cursed him a coward and to have hollow bones for lack of bravery. But Sipo did not change his mind, and he alone refrained when the tower began to rise. For a year and a day did they stack the stones, until there was only one stone left for the mountain to be reached."

"The Gods cast it down," Neshamah said, tone certain.

"They did," his mother agreed. "And all who had cast as stone were cursed with fetters, forever binding them to the ground. The king, who had deceived the others, was twice cursed: he was

condemned to dwell into the water, beneath even the ground, and fathered all the beasts who dwell there. Only Sipo was spared, for her alone had been faithful to his creators."

He stirred uneasily.

"What does it mean, the fetters?" Neshamah asked.

"It means, my sweet, that of all the living things of Creation only birds are free," his mother smiled. "That is why they alone can fly, for they are the children of Sipo. When Peleg things he insults you, Neshamah, in truth he does you great honour."

The small prince nodded, but his eyes were fixed on the blue sky.

One day, Neshamah thought, he too would be free.

—

Sage Dimka's dream hall was the work of decades.

The Twilight Sages were not an order allowed to hold wealth or power, the same strict oaths that had made them the trusted advisors of every king in Temen Doyov forbidding it, but here in Tvarigu there were ways around the words. The Sages had been born among the great stalactites and the city was the seat of their power — it was only in name that they did not rule the seven tribes settled here. Yet it had still taken many years for Sage Dimka to receive enough gifts to shape the dream hall to his tastes. Neshamah disliked the pillars of vividly painted wood jutting up the walls like ribs — garish — but the mosaics in white and red tiles covering every surface were striking.

The young man stepped on the cool ceramic tiles barefooted, as it would be a grave insult to enter a Sage's dream hall otherwise. Kings and queens of the Firstborn owned the lands, ruling over tribes and cities, but in their own hall every Twilight Sage stood above even crowns. Dimka was seated across the floor, atop the dais of worn stone he had taken from a rival sage in a riddle-war, and from the rents in the floor around the dais thick white smoke wafted up. To Neshamah, bound as he was by the limitations of his humanity, the smoke reeked of sickly-sweet rot. It was finer than the finest of incenses to the Sage, however, and burnt *dedesu* was known to his kind into the state between life and death where they glimpsed truths.

Neshamah approached the dais and bowed low. Dimka opened sleepy blue eyes and seemed startled, as if he had forgot granting the audience. He might well have. Neshamah's teacher among the Sages was not known as skilled speaker or guide of men. His long black robes were rumpled and stained, his grey hair ragged and his face hollow-cheeked even for a drow. He looked more a vagrant than a wise man. Neshamah cared little. He had already made a study of

men, glimpsed the levers that moved them. It had been another tutelage he sought from Dimka Deep-Sleep, and he his hopes had not been disappointed.

"Neshamah," Dimka said, sounding vaguely pleased. "Come, sit. This is a good day."

Smoothly, the youngest prince of Sephirah obeyed: knees on the ground, feet folded behind him.

"I am pleased to hear this," Neshamah said.

The old drow frowned, grey brow creasing.

"This is not teaching day," Dimka recalled. "There are no lessons. Have you come, son of Keter, to spend one of your questions?"

"I have," he replied.

His years under Dimka had not come without limits or a price. Many a secret of his people Neshamah had given over, what had been whispered in the Hall of Thirteen and the arcane teachings of the Conclave, and he had even given an oath never to lead Sephirah to war against Temen Doyov should he become king. In exchange he had been granted five years of tutelage and the right to ask for three secrets. He had already asked for two. One spent to learn that the Garden was older than Creation, that the fae had come before, and another to learn how to partake of death. This would be his last, and soon his five years would come at an end.

Neshamah had learned from the Twilight Sages nearly all he had sought.

"You will wait before asking," Dimka said. "I was given the right to become one with the shade of Sage Nadezhda and my preparations are complete. We will discuss when I have lessened death."

Neshamah lowered his head in agreement, though his consent meant nothing in this hall. Dimka smiled, pleased, and breathed in deep of the dedesu smoke. When he breathed out, sorcery flared. Beneath the dais would lay the bones of Sage Nadezhda, hidden but close, and as the necromancy took hold of them the very air shivered. The warmth turned to icy cold. Dimka gasped and rocked back, his eyes turning silver as he smiled in ecstasy and consumed the memories of the dead Sage. It was a great honour to be given leave to consume anyone at all instead of simply calling them, much consume one who had been of their order while she lived.

After long moments of Dimka convulsing, the Sage finally stilled and the air slowly began to turn warm again. The Twilight Sage

breathed in and out slowly, resting, but his eyes were open and awake.

"How should this one referring to the Sage?" Neshamah asked.

Dimka shivered.

"I have not yet renounced gender," the old drow said. "She died too young. I am not yet more."

The oldest Sages, those who had eaten the memories of dozens – some even as much as a ninety-nine, which they held a sacred number – of deceased, turned strange. Abandoned gender and sometimes even their names, seeing themselves as far removed from the drow as drow were from gloom-lizards.

"Soon," Dimka smiled. "Soon. I straddle the border now, Neshamah. Ask your question."

"What are the boundaries of what the Gods have created?"

A question had had laboured months to craft. Not merely the boundaries of Creation, which he might find himself in time, but of all that the Gods had created. The Twilight Sage leaned back, pulling his robes tightly against his frame.

"This is not known to us," Dimka said.

Neshamah bore the disappointment stoically. He had always known it might be the answer. The Sages made children of the wizards of Sephirah, but they were not as gods. They too were still plumbing the depths of the dark for answers.

"Through the passing of life into death we have glimpsed the borders of Creation," the Sage said. "What separates now from after. Yet our learning is not without its shallows."

"Someone must know," Neshamah said. "Someone must have looked."

Dimka slowly nodded.

"There are old tales," the Sage said. "From a time where our people were mere children. After the dark there was a war, and in that war the Ancients fought the Wrath. It is said that the drow fled that great struggle, and for that cowardice were marked – for we were once pale as milk, as some of your kind are."

"The Titans and the Drakoi," Neshamah murmured.

The old drow's face hardened and the smoke stilled around him, as if frozen.

"Do not speak those names, ignorant child," Dimka hissed. "They are powers best left unstirred. Even the shadow of their shadow casts wide enough for a world to drown in."

Feigning being chastened, the prince bowed his head. He waited until the Sage's mood had settled before speaking again.

"And these great powers left behind answers?" he asked.

"It is said that the Ancients mapped out not only Creation but all that lies beyond it, for their strength came not only from this earth but the stars in the sky," Dimka said. "They made wonders that show the lay of all that exists."

Hunger gnawed at his stomach.

"And where might I find such a wonder, Sage Dimka?" Neshamah asked.

The old drow wryly smiled.

"At the heart of horror," Dimka said. "Deep in the Cursed Lands, where the rats feast on one another, there was once a city of the Ancients. Look there, and answers might remain to be found."

The prince of Sephirah smiled. He knew where he would journey, when his five years ended.

—

Was there a thing as accursed in all of Creation as the Chain of Hunger?

There were many stories in Sephirah of how the land how come to be, but the simplest and oldest remained the best known: a god had died here, and his malice seeped into the land. The curse spread to all who dwelled here, making them devour each other, until one beast rose above all others. So a rat became a Rat, and the malice of the dead god lived on. Neshamah had not believed the tale, trusting instead the learned extrapolation of the Conclave, but now that he had journeyed through the rustling plains he was not so certain. There was *something* here, in the air and the earth, and it was becoming stronger the deeper he went into the sea of tall grass.

A year he had spent finding the lost city of the Ancients, for not even the Twilight Sages had known the way, and though Neshamah had grown exhausted iron will commanded his body to continue. The Rats prowled these lands in packs and horse, devouring each other and all living things save the tall grass of the plains — it was poisonous to them — but the prince had learned to hide himself beneath sorcery. He would not be smelled or seen, so long as he was careful, and he was. As the months

passed and the last of his food went he had learned to suffer the taste of Rat flesh, but no journey was without sacrifice. Nothing could be earned when nothing was given.

And he had found the end of his path, at last. The ruins jutted up from the ground like spires of silver and stone, the wind passing through them and leaving behind a song of mournful sighs. The sight that had him shivering was the mirrors that still spun around the spires, hundreds of them and none smaller than a man. They moved in arcane patterns, the magic that moved them undaunted even when the kingdom that had given them life had long been ground to dust. His stride long, Neshamah approached the ruins. The Rats avoided them, afraid or otherwise moved, but it was with great care he ventured through the spires.

Whatever had given the Rats pause was still there.

To grasp the purpose of this place was beyond Neshamah, but he had studied the works of the Titans. Learned some of the meanings in their strange letters. It was enough to guide him through the silent maze as a hundred reflections glared back at him, deeper and deeper until he found a stele of stone. Excitement thrummed in his veins. It was why he had come for, what the scarce tales and records he had found called a 'Seeing of Phoebe'. He hurried through the dust and laid reverent fingers against the stele, which stood half as high as the spires and almost as broad, and felt the stone was warm. Still living.

Ten days it took him to wake the stele, and even so it was not fully woken. His understanding was too shallow. Yet Neshamah found what he had come for: a *map*. The Titans had felt out the boundaries of what the Gods had created and set their secrets to stone, which the prince now had laid out before his eyes. A sphere, the lay of Creation, enveloped by a circle. The Garden, the realm of the fae. To the sides were two great realms, the Heavens and the Hells, one deep beyond sight but unmoving while the other was shallow but ever-shifting. All these were put to stone, writhing in light before his eyes, but the prince was not satisfied.

"Are you incomplete?" he asked the stone.

It must be. Else where in the lay of it all would be the provenance of the great abominations, the creatures men called demons. He wandered away and back to his camp, lost in thought and the deep silences of his place. Fear had come to him. Creation, he had discerned, was as small garden in an ocean of nothingness. Created by the power of the Gods, it was their work and its boundaries had been set bound them. All the creatures they had made obeyed these laws – men and fae, devils and hallowed. Yet there must be something more, for the Twilight Sages had followed the thread of death and found that souls went somewhere beyond their reach. The embrace of the Gods, priests

said, but what did that *mean*? It was neither the Heavens nor the Hells, it was not a place of Creation or the Garden, so where did they go?

Neshamah had hoped the Titans would know, but what they handed him instead was a troubling thing. Demons were believed to come from the Hells, the very deepest of them, but the prince had long doubted this. The Hells were ever-shifting, while what records existed of the demons spoke of creatures fundamental and unchanging. Neshamah had thought there might be another realm, one hidden but close to the Hells, where sorcerers had learned to reach by accident. Only the Ancients did not agree, for in their map of existence they wrote nothing at all of demons. Not even among the Hells. As if they were from another existence entirely.

Neshamah returned to the stone the following day, hoping to wake up more of its secrets, but when he laid a hand against the warm stone he went still.

Eyes were on him.

The sting of the blow that came through the stone broke his jaw, his arm and both his legs. He fell to the ground, bleeding and swallowing blood, as the contempt of something greater than he whipped at his very soul. The stele cracked, the sight ripping a scream out of him where pain had not, and before he could even try to crawl towards it fell to pieces. A wonder of the world, shattered in an instant because one of its makers had judged him unfit to sift through the ashes of their people. Covered in dust and stone, slowly bleeding out, Neshamah laid there and looked up at the sky. Blue and bright, the same as that morning so long ago where the flame had been lit in him.

"I will find out," he swore. "Deny me all you like, Titan, but I will find out if Creation is finite."

—

Three years.

He had lied and betrayed and begged and bargained, but none of it mattered. Three years had passed since the evening where he lay in the dust at the heart of the city of mirrors and at last Neshamah had what he sought: answers. In the hidden place below the fortress he had murdered a man for, the cells had revealed truths to him. All things of Creation and the Garden were moved by the presence of demons. So were devils and objects blessed with Light, though the ways of it were different. Limited, he had discovered, as if in the very fabric of the Heavens and Hells limits had been inscribed.

And only one manner of hands could have written those words.

On the last day of the third year, the last question was answered. Neshamah had not learned where souls went after death, only that they went, but the question beneath it he had followed to the end. If the Gods were infinite, omnipotent, why was the world fettered? Why did death exist – and its existence was a choice, had to be, because *fae did not die* – and why was entropy was allowed to devour all of existence one instant at a time? Priests gave answers to these, but none that had ever satisfied the prince of Sephirah. To worship a riddle was to live a house without candles. And at dawn that morning, Neshamah had established that there was nothing that the presence could not affect given long enough. Not even a shard from the corpse of an angel.

The truth that followed was a horror, but he did not deny it.

He torched the fortress, all trace of the works he had wrought. He made certain nothing would crawl out of the ashes, and when he was satisfied nothing would he left the smoking ruin behind. Neshamah walked out into the wilds until he found a grassy hill with a pair of trees atop it, birds singing in the branches as the sun and wind caressed the land. The prince of Sephirah laid in the grass beneath the tree, looking up at the blue sky through the leaves. He raised up a hand, as it to reach it, and left it there. A long while passed, until to his startlement a bird came to land on the outstretched fingers. A small, drab brown thing.

A sparrow.

"A demon can affect everything," Neshamah murmured to the sparrow, "because it is not of this existence. Not of Creation or any other place. And yet, undeniably, it exists."

The sparrow gripped his fingers, trilled up at its fellows.

"There was another Creation," Neshamah smiled. "Before ours. And it no longer exists, save what the Gods saw fit to take from it."

The demons themselves. What had been their wager, he wondered? Above against Below was the writ of this Creation, the answer that would be found, but the older existence must have had a different purpose. Essence against form, perhaps? There could be no purer essence than that of a demon, which affected all it beheld simply by existing. He had moved a little, and the sparrow shuffled around on his hand.

"There was one before us," the prince of Sephirah calmly said, "and I believe there will be one *after*. We are finite. It will all end."

The sparrow trilled. He smiled and flicked his hand. The bird, startled, flew up into the sky. It was a lie, that endless blue.

His mother's story had lied. There was not a single creature born of Creation that had been spared fetters by the Gods.

But, one day, Neshamah would be free.

Strangers

"The only true kindness is that offered to a passing stranger, when there can be no expectation of reward."

– Melete the Stern, Atalante philosopher

Hanno did not feel as if he had come to a city, though the Gigantes called it such.

Hemera was nothing like what he had known, the cramped and organized streets of Arwad. The airy halls of the Gigantes were scattered across the mountain and sown as if by whim, each a small kingdom carved to the preference of its king: some were slender spires of stone, others singing mazes of glass and one built entirely of flowing water frozen in time. Pale roads of stone led them to one another, shifting with the mood of the ancient giants, and only a few were not so ephemeral. It was those that Hanno learned to follow, for they led him from the house he had been given to the heart of Hemera itself: the Proskenion.

The air was light and sunny today, the White Knight found as he rose with the dawn and began his walk down the pale road. It would remain so as long as enough of the Gigantes preferred the climate, for in Hemera the weather itself bent to the will of the giants. It stayed to their liking, following their moods. Hanno had seen both great lightning storms ravage the mountains with never a drop of rain touching a roof and pounding sun that would have turned stone to hot plates spare the most delicate blades of grass. Today the ancients had chosen the breeze and a gentle, glowing morning. Hanno smiled, his breath and the sound of his boots on the stone the only breaks in the quiet.

He liked morning like these best.

One did not tire walking the pale roads and always found where they were meant to go, but the White Knight had learned a trick to it. When you emptied themselves of desire, took a step back and sunk into the calm the Seraphim had shown him, you could follow the length of the road like running a finger down a spine. And from there you could navigate a detour like the one he'd chosen to take: past the pale stairs to the east, under the House of Ceyx and its winding emerald columns. It was the path that allowed him to see all of the Proskenion splayed out below, and live every time he'd come here the sight of the citadel of marble and air stole the breath out of him.

It was a wonder of hanging gardens and stone skene, beautiful halls where the giants gathered. Rivers and waterfalls had been sculpted as intricately as the stone while light was invigorated or dimmed so that every artful touch drew the eye while the imperfections faded. There was nowhere like the Proskenion anywhere else in the world, the Gigantes said, and Hanno believed them. Sometimes he could hardly believe his own eyes.

Yet for all that the beauty was moving, it was also deeply... different. Alien. Gigantes did not live as men did, keeping common houses or making families. They were solitary creatures at heart, coming together only for purpose or pleasure, and the Proskenion had been built to that truth. The mountainside citadel was where the giants came to debate their kind or display their works for the eyes of others, entire branches of it filling or emptying without visible rhyme or reason. Telekles, who was guide to Hanno whenever he cared to be, had said that it was also here the giants gathered to choose their chiefs – though this was rare, and the White Knight had never seen it. Allowing himself a moment to enjoy the sight in the morning sun, Hanno began to descend towards his chosen entrance: a strange garden whose many flowers were made entirely out of coloured stones. Which grew and mixed as if they were living things.

This day would make it a full month since had had come to Hemera, and Telekles had promised that with the turn of the moon there would be an answer to his request. The Chamber of Borrowed Lives had been built by spellsingers, in ancient days the Gigantes called 'the Glory', and with the Titan Seats forever broken now only spellsingers could allow entrance to it. Yet those elusive souls were not easily moved to haste, or even interest. Hanno suspected that if the touch of Judgement did not yet burn in him his request would not have been entertained as more than an amusing anecdote. Yet it had been, and Telekles had spoke of meeting at Sioemeros, the giant's preferred skene.

Telekles had never mentioned a time, not particularly inclined to keep track of hours in a way common to his immortal kind, and so Hanno would come with dawn and wait until his guide arrived.

Thrice the White Knight was passed by the long stride of Gigantes as he made his way through the Proskenion, pausing to signify deference and gratitude by lowering his head and keeping his hands behind his back. His understanding of the nuances of the giants' half-silent tongue was yet weak, so when they replied they kept to the broad strokes: acknowledgement, curiosity, and in the case of the third irritation. The last Gigantes stood still and Hanno had to remain in the uncomfortable pose, cold eyes on him until the bearded giant tired of exerting his right and strode away. Not all Gigantes had been pleased a human had been allowed into Hemera.

Some yet remembered the days when Hanno's kind had come here only as slaves, labourers and servants for their Gigantes masters.

Siomeros was not difficult to find. Unlike many skene it was not elaborately built, instead little more than a circle of columns crowned by a plain frieze. Within a few stone seats, larger than some houses Hanno had known, had been carelessly strewn. The wonder hidden in here was only felt when one crossed into the circle, instantly felt: silence. Complete, utter silence. It was as if Siomeros was a realm apart from the rest of Creation, untouched by its vagaries. It was oddly restful, Hanno decided as he passed by a great column. Brown eyes scanned about for Telekles, whose silhouette might have been hidden by one thing or another, but the Gigantes was not there.

Someone was, though, and the White Knight froze at the sight: it was another human.

A girl clad in robes of coarse brown cloth, tanned with long dark tresses going down her back. She was sitting with her eyes closed atop what would have been a seat for a giant but was a perch for her, brow creased with concentration. Hanno hesitated, lingering at the bottom of the stone seat. He was burningly curious, but she did not seem inclined to talk.

"I can feel you staring," the girl said. "Don't you have somewhere else to be?"

She did not open her eyes and her tone was mild, but the way she flicked her head implied dismissiveness. It was a subtle enough gesture Hanno almost missed it. *She speaks their tongue better than I do*, he thought.

"I do not," Hanno replied in tradertalk, frowning as he realized he was uncertain what language she'd spoken to him in. "I am to wait here for another."

The girl sighed, opening green eyes.

"I was told to come here because it is a fine place to meditate without distractions," she peevishly said. "You are proving otherwise."

"I apologize," the White Knight replied. "I will find somewhere else to stand if you prefer. It's only..."

She narrowed her eyes at him, like a gargoyle glaring down from above. Gigantes couldn't do that, he thought. The muscles in their face didn't allow them to do it.

"Only what?" she asked.

"We are the only two humans in all of Hemera, as far as I know," Hanno said. "Are you not even slightly curious why I am here? I am certainly curious about you."

"It's human business, so it has nothing to do with me," the girl said. "I've left all that behind."

"It seems to have followed you here," Hanno drily said. "May I ask for a name, at least?"

The girl rolled her eyes at him.

"I am Antigone," she said. "Now go away."

The White Knight smiled, offered a bow.

"Hanno," he said.

"I didn't ask," Antigone called back.

He went away, leaving her to her meditations as he had offered. Telekles arrived past noon, by the look of the sun, but Hanno was left smiling anyway for his guide brought the answer he'd wished for: the Chamber of Borrowed Lives would be opened to him.

—

The second time Hanno of Arwad met Antigone she set him on fire.

Not on purpose, mind you, but his eyebrow was still scorched right off. He'd been heading to the paths after a long day in the Chamber when the column of flame fell down from the sky, and though he managed to call on the Light he was just a little too slow. The same girl as before leapt down from a jade rooftop, frowning at him as he hastily patted out the last of the flames on his clothes. Antigone looked highly displeased and Hanno dimly wondered if he should be reaching for his sword.

"Why were you in the middle of the road?" Antigone asked.

"Why were you setting the road on fire?" Hanno incredulously shot back.

"It wasn't about the road, you idiot, I was finally hearing the—"

Halfway through the first sentence of what promised to be a furious chewing out, the dark-haired girl closed her mouth. She breathed in and out, and instead of continuing to speak raised her chin high. Contempt. She then flicked her head to the side twice, exaggerated dismissal, and let her shoulders slump.

"I have no idea what the shoulders mean," the White Knight noted.

Antigone's frustration visibly mounted and she touched her left shoulder with her right hand. Flat palm, fingers tight. Unfortunately for her, he had no idea what that meant either.

"Is there a reason you cannot speak to me out loud?" Hanno asked.

She sighed.

"My teachers say that I should unlearn the need to talk," Antigone said. "That is a deficient human habit and hinders listening to the world."

Hanno stared at her blankly.

"Teachers?" he slowly repeated. "As in *plural*?"

She cocked an eyebrow, then started and made herself smooth her face. Gigantes faces, he remembered, were not expressive. Nuance was expressed by gesture.

"Yes," she said. "What of it?"

"I barely even have one," the White Knight told her.

Telekles did not consider him a charge, Hanno thought, so much as a recurring obligation. Like painting a wall or scraping the barnacles off a ship's bottom. The giant had time for him only occasionally and was not interested in a closer tie.

"You must be deaf, then," Antigone shrugged.

He did not quite catch the meaning of that, but the undertone was even more dismissive the head flicks.

"And you are being taught by multiple Gigantes," Hanno said, still astonished. "What is it you have done to attract their interest?"

It was her time to seem startled.

"Kreios told them to," she said.

Ah, that would explain it.

"So you know someone," he hummed. "May I ask who? I did not know any of the giants still cared for events beyond the Titanomachy."

She looked at him as if he were a particularly dim gnat.

"I just told you who," Antigone said.

He frowned.

"The expression actually goes 'Kronia told them to'," Hanno informed her. "At least, that is the way the sailors from Levante

say it. I was asking who among the Gigantes it was that has spoken for you, specifically."

Her frustration visibly ticked up. Hanno was not sure why, she'd just used a common saying for 'orders from above'. It was only natural he'd wonder as to who that above was.

"Kreios told them to," Antigone repeated, slowly enunciating every syllable.

A pause.

"A dead Titan told the Gigantes to teach you magic," Hanno repeated.

He met her eyes.

"How long have you been out in the sun?" he gently asked.

The second time she set him on fire, it was very much on purpose.

—

The third time Hanno of Arwad met Antigone she was wearing a mask.

It was made of clay and painted over in bold strokes of colour, covering her face entirely. With the hood of her robes pulled down and the long sleeves covering her hands, there was not a visible inch of skin for anyone to see. It was not him that had found her this time, for the White Knight had been in Siomeros for hours now. Leaning atop a great seat of stone, looking up at the night sky. Cloudy, tonight, so that the moon's beam could stand out starkly. It was soothing after a day in the Chamber to lie there and watch, to do and hear nothing. His limbs were not tired, but his mind was. Drifting away into the nothing was the closest to peace he could find.

Sleep was no longer restful, these days. His exhaustion was not the kind that closing his eyes could mend.

Antigone had climbed up the side of the stone, which could not be coincidence. There were other, further places for her to sit should she wish to meditate. All that set this one apart from the others was his presence. Still, Hanno did not spare her more than the first glance. The stone was cool under his hand and the sky above was all smoke and moonlight. He let the sensations soothe him, ignoring her even as he heard her move. He was not in the mood to discern the nuances of the Gigantes tongue in the hands of someone much his superior in that lore. She lost patience, eventually.

"You are the White Knight," Antigone said.

Accused, almost.

"I am," Hanno said.

"You never said," she replied, definitely accusing.

"What does it matter?" he shrugged.

Antigone scoffed.

"What is it you are doing here, White Knight?" she asked. "The Patient Craft did not say, only that it was a duty of angels and should not be meddled in."

The Patient Craft, Hanno recalled from the lessons of his friends in the Luminous Echo, was the smallest of the choruses in the Titanomachy. Yet it counted the most spellsingers, most of the time, so it was held in great respect. It concerned itself largely with the practicalities in the work of maintaining the greatest works of the Gigantes but also spoke broadly in favour of isolation and mandatory children-making. That Antigone's teachers were so respected spoke to the truth of what he had first disbelieved: a Titan had spoken for her. The Riddle-Maker himself, the last of his kind.

"I am here to learn," Hanno finally said.

The girls stood there awkwardly, shuffling on her feet.

"That is commendable," Antigone said.

And he had so much still to learn, Hanno thought. The Chamber of Borrowed Lived seared that knowledge in him, broke into his bones and forced him to swallow it down, but it always seemed as if there was more to do. To see. Another lesson, another battle, another choice. Every day he left the stone coffin aching from every pore of his body, limping, but it was not enough. He was not yet prepared for what lay ahead. The Tribunal meant him to be the sword that would slay a great Evil, and even when his body bent in pain they did not believe him ready.

"You have impressed with your ability to withstand the Chamber," Antigone tried, when it became clear he would not answer. "It has been commented upon."

"I have withstood harsher glare than what burns in there," Hanno quietly replied.

The girl sighed.

"I am trying to say," Antigone said, "that I am like you."

That was enough to have him glance at her again, for never had that seemed less true: under moonlight in those hooded green

robes, with her masked face, she looked more a spectre than a girl.

"I am the Witch of the Woods," she told him.

Ah, he thought, breathing out. That had been what he felt, scratching at the edge of his senses. Keeping his curiosity alight. The sensation was dimmer these days, like everything else, but he didn't mind that so much. Everything was easier to see clearly when the calm was on him. Still, Hanno found himself smiling.

"Perhaps I should have asked for a Name instead of a name, when we first met," the White Knight said.

"Maybe," Antigone said, body moving to imply doubt.

Then, to his utter surprise, she sat by his side.

"What is it like, seeing a Choir?" she asked.

Hanno felt the cold stone beneath, saw the cold light of the moon above. The nothing he had been drifting into felt far away now, out of reach. But he answered, and quietly they spoke under the night sky. The sound of her voice, the White Knight found, kept him tethered here and now.

The following morning, he woke up rested for the first time in a year.

—

The night under the cloudy moon had been as an opened gate: the two of them sought each other out now. Not frequently, for both had been brought to Hemera by higher callings, but whenever the time could be spared they met in the Siomeros. It was a balm to him, speaking with another after the hours in the Chamber. It... grounded his thoughts, kept them in the here and now. He drifted less and less into the nothing, and though his body still ached it was a different sort. He was learning, growing. Staying in himself. Else who would he be, when he spoke with Antigone?

She, too, was changing. Her teachers loomed tall in her words. They had taught her secrets and sorcery, but they pressed more into her hands. Silence, a face that was made of clay and a disdain for what lay in the lands beyond the Titanomachy. Human business, she'd called it, as if it was something to be purged out of her. A weakness standing in her way before she could become like the Gigantes, perhaps even be one of them. Hanno asked of her parents, but she had never known them. Antigone had been raised by a creature that had once called itself a god, deep in the woods.

"Hunters came sometimes, looking for the shrine," she told him. "To loot and steal. And sometimes the desperate tried their hand at chasing rumours, thinking I would end all their troubles with a wish."

"There is more to people than what you saw," Hanno replied.

"It doesn't matter," Antigone said. "What do I share with them, or they me?"

Hanno studied her.

"Is it your words I hear," the White Knight asked, "or those of the Patient Craft?"

She did not answer and avoided him for a sennight after. Neither apologized, but they began spending time together again regardless. Antigone led him into the wilds below the mountain, where she introduced him to a great wolf she had known all her life. Lykaia, her name was, and she was large as a house. The White Knight was carefully polite and did not lose his hand when he offered it to be smelled, which he considered a fine outcome. Lykaia later offered him a strip of raw deer that evening, which Antigone assured him was a mark of approval.

The weeks passed, then months and years. Changes came with them. They grew into the mantles, she under starlight and he lay in a coffin of stone. It was his third aspect, the one that was not the Sword of Judgement or the White Knight's, that nearly broke him. It was the realization that he would never truly leave the Chamber of Borrowed Lives, that it would stay in him until he died. Once he grasped the truth of that it swelled in him like a river, bursting out as a single word: **Recall**. He was his own Chamber now, forever echoing other songs.

He retreated into himself, hiding away in the mountains. Barely eating or drinking. It was Antigone who found him, made him bathe and sleep in a bed. She stayed with him for days, rarely leaving the room. Eventually he spoke, though not once did she ask.

"I am not sure," Hanno confessed, "how much of myself is me."

Green eyes watched him unblinking.

"The make more of it," Antigone said, and leaned forward.

Her lips were soft against him. It was not his first kiss, but his first in many years, and neither stopped. Not even when hands wandered and clothes were thrown aside. Afterwards, they lay together and he felt her breath against his neck, the warmth of her skin against his. She'd been right, he thought. This was him and no one else. He could not become lost so long as he followed his own path.

"Thank you," he murmured against her ear.

He felt her smile back. Neither of them spoke of it again or returned to that bed, for the night had not been meant as a promise. Antigone cared more for stars than sex, and Hanno... he was not certain he had it on him, to be with another. Not since he had become the White Knight. There would be parts of him he would never be able to share, callings that would supersede any other, and it would have been a half-hearted affection to pretend that could be enough. But he did not forget, and neither did Antigone. It was a sort of love too, what they had done.

And one that would not ask either of them to bend who they were, so he counted himself lucky for having it.

—

Hanno held the artefact in his hands, reverent.

The gift from the Luminous Echo looked like a sword, but that was a passing thing. Under his fingers, following his will, it changed into a spear in a moment and then into a warhammer. He had told the giants he was not worthy of the gift, but they had refused the answer. The chorus he had befriended was friend to the Choirs in turn, and they had disdained the thought of letting the Sword of Judgement leave these lands empty-handed. For the White Knight was leaving, after all this time. An acquaintance in the Sublime Auspice had brought word to him from the broader world: the League of Free Cities had erupted into civil war.

Foretelling by the spellsingers spoke of Evil coming down from the north, down the river, and great slaughters to come. Hanno could wait no longer. He had learned what he could from the Chamber and the learning had changed him. He would carry it with him until he died, an aspect carved into his soul. Now there was only the duty that lay ahead, and that duty awaited in the Free Cities. He had requested of the Sublime Auspice, who of all Gigantes kept closer ties outside the Titanomachy, to arrange for him a ship. One would soon sail towards the coast, a galley from Levante that would bring him to Nicae. All that was left here for him was goodbyes.

He found Antigone where they always met, in the heart of the Siomeros. How many mornings, how many evenings had they spent together in the silence of these tall columns? Too many to count. Antigone stood alone atop a seat, her mask at her belt and her hood down. The sun was dipping down across the horizon, the clouds framing the descent perfectly symmetrical on both sides of the burning redness. He climbed to stand by her side, their arms just closed enough to brush against each other.

"How long?" Antigone asked.

"I leave with dawn," Hanno said. "The ship will only wait for a few days at the coast and there are no roads for me to travel."

She nodded, silent.

"We will meet again," Hanno gently said.

He would return to Hemera, one day. He could feel it in his bones. Antigone's jaw tightened.

"Yes," she murmured.

Her back straightened.

"Yes," Antigone said, tone grown firm. "We will. I will find you, Hanno, when my learning is done."

He went still, not hiding his surprise.

"There will always be more to learn," the White Knight said.

"Creation is large," the Witch of the Woods conceded. "And I have seen little of it."

"It will be human business, out there," Hanno warned her.

A long silence. Her eyes met his.

"That, too, I will learn," Antigone said. "You did not lessen yourself in Hemera, Hanno. Did not carve away at who you are."

She looked up at the burning red sun in the distance.

"Neither will I."

Hunt

"We fear Evil as we fear the wave that drowns us, but it rests atop an ocean of smaller evils."

– Extract from the transcript of the 'Sermon of the Shores', as spoken by Sister Salienta

Of all the ships in her father's fleet, Hye Su loved the Venerable Tortoise the most.

It wasn't like the others because it'd come from across the Tyrian Sea, from Asadal: the faraway land where her father had been born. Most of the ships he'd led when he went into exile had sunk in the crossing so there weren't many left, and of those that remained the Venerable Tortoise was by far the largest. It had four masts and two decks, squat but swift because it'd been built as a warship to fight the Yan Tei. It wasn't because of

that Hye called it her favourite though: the Tortoise was the first home she'd ever known. The earliest thing remembered was the sound of wood groaning as the keel cut through the waves.

Hye had been born a sailor, everyone said so. She had her own table on the forecastle, where if she was good she was allowed to work on her letters and numbers instead of in her father's cabin, and today she'd been diligent even if Asadal formal characters were just the worst. She loved the days out at sea, so it was a little sad that the Tortoise was headed back to Relic Reef. Although, by the look on her father's face as he looked into the Baalite eye, maybe they wouldn't be heading there quite just yet.

"Is it a merchant ship?" Hye eagerly asked.

Iseul Su, Admiral-in-Exile of the Southern Fleet, was a tall man with a thick build and a rounded belly. Hye's father was tanned to leather from sun and salt and his feathered hat was raggedy around the edges, but his long beard and mustache were always immaculately groomed. Mother said that it was because he was his own true love so he took best care of himself but Dad always insisted that it was just his duty to be well-groomed as an admiral of the Asadal navy, which was the finest in Creation. Her fathers set down the longview and patted her head.

"Ashuran, my little petrel," Admiral Iseul said. "A trader with belly full of goods by the way she drags water, headed south for Penthes."

It must be coming back from Thalassina, Hye thought.

"You always say Ashurans are thieves and swindlers," she said.

"As is only natural," her father solemnly replied, "since they are descended from the Baalite Hegemony, who are the greatest swindlers and thieves to ever live."

"So they're going to be strong if we try to take the ship?" Hye asked. "Tae says the Hegemony was a great empire, so they must have been conquerors once."

"The Hegemony would never do anything so impolite as *conquering*, petrel," Admiral Iseul replied, amused. "They only colonize land that other people mistakenly believed was theirs, then defend it most vigorously."

That sounded like a lot more effort than just stabbing people for their things.

"So we can take the Ashurans then," she sagely said. "'cause they're weak."

Her father grinned, patted her head again.

"I believe we will," he said. "We've the time to spare before we sail for the Reef. Be a good girl and find Tae, yes?"

She nodded even as he peeled away and began bellowing orders in Koryo, his native tongue, the crew cheering. Hye hadn't even put away her scrolls and ink yet when Tae found her instead of the other way around, the tall and grizzled sailor nodding approvingly at her efforts. Tae was nice, especially when he drank and said too much, but Hye was oathsworn to resent him because he was her designated keeper. She was already debating spilling ink on his boots, which he definitely noticed by the warning look he gave her.

"If you clean up well and quickly, I'll let you sit in the crow's nest with your bow," Tae told her.

He always spoke in tradertongue when her father wasn't around. There were still some crew from Asadal who thought that their admiral would one day lead them back across the Tyrian Sea, but Tae wasn't one of them.

"Fine," Hye loudly sighed, trying to hide her eagerness.

And failing, from the way he grinned at her through his drooping moustache. Pursuing the Ashurans took hours, the other ship trying to slip them and ride the wind to League waters in the hopes that a patrol might bail them out, but their hull was full and the Venerable Tortoise more of a hare when the wind was at her back. True to his word, Tae took her up in the crow's nest with the grown-up bow her mother had given her last year and a quiver full of arrows.

"Only shoot if they don't surrender," Tae reminded her.

Hye shot him an offended look.

"I'm a pirate too," she replied, indignant.

Were people ever going to stop ruffling her hair? Ugh. The Ashurans struck their sail when it became clear they weren't going to get away and allowed the Tortoise to approach. Her father shouted back and forth with their captain a while, promising to spare the crew if there was no fight, and it looked like this was going to get done the nice way until a hard-eyed woman on the Ashuran ship screamed out something in High Tyrian and Dasom's torso exploded in a whirl of wind.

"Ship mage," Tae cursed. "Their pride always gets crew killed."

It was a bloody fight after that, but the Ashurans did most the bleeding. The Tortoise's crew was twice as large and they'd all been fighters for years, so the merchant ship's deck was swept in half an hour and the last survivors holed up in the hull

surrendered not long after. Hye shot three arrows and wanted to kill the ship mage but Tae stopped her firing at the woman.

"Don't draw her attention," he warned.

She came down when it was all over but her father wasn't back yet. He'd gone over with the boarders, in the first wave, and now he was talking with some of the survivors to see if they wanted to join his fleet. The merchant ship hadn't even been damaged much, so maybe they'd get keep it! Hye went to get arrows out of bodies, starting with her own, and that was when her father found her. He was covered in blood and in a fine mood.

"Petrel," he grinned, sweeping her up as she shrieked in joy and dismay. "I saw you up there with the bow. Did you get anyone?"

"I killed twelve," Hye lied.

He cocked any eyebrow at her, then shot a glance at Tae.

"One," the traitor said. "Clean, right through the throat. Two wounded."

"If you'd said two I would have believed you," her father told her. "Tailor the lie to the believable, daughter."

She pouted. Hye was totally capable of killing twelve men, she just hadn't gotten into the swing of it yet.

"The day's young and we'll be moving around the cargo for hours yet," he continued. "Be a dear and return to your table, yes? You're not done with your letters."

"But I want to see the loot," Hye whined. "And there's too many characters, anyway, I'll never use them all."

"You are nine already, petrel," Iseul Su firmly said. "Before you are ten you must either be an educated and graceful lady knowing all her characters or have slain one hundred men. I will tolerate nothing less from my daughter."

Ugh, that was so unfair. She was never going to fight enough people to get out of learning the characters, actually killing people with arrows was *hard*. Her father tweaked her nose.

"There's a word for people who stop learning, petrel," he said.

"Corpse," she dutifully finished.

"Good girl," he smiled, and was about to speak when a shout came from above.

It was Haneul up in the crow's nest and she'd called out a word in Koryo that Hye didn't know. Father cocked an eyebrow, then stroked his beard.

"Tae," he said, "get the good tea out and a kettle boiling while I get changed."

The grizzled man nodded. Hye frowned at her father as Tae left.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because Haneul is seeing someone running on the water towards us," he said. "Either your mother's returned, petrel, or an Emerald Sword caught us on the open water."

He laughed.

"Either way, it deserves tea and a fresh shirt."

—

It was Mother.

She'd been running on the sea for three days, half of it through a storm, and she'd wrecked her sword again. Which she blamed Father for, but when he poured her a cup of that disgusting yellow tea she decided to forgive him and kissed the side of his neck. The crew had been happy to hear she was on her way, calling out that 'Lady Borean' was returning as soon as Mother's long red coat became visible on the horizon. Hye sat in her chair with her hands in her lap, back straight, and waited for her mother to finish shedding off her coat and setting aside her bow.

Her mother's people didn't really have last names the way humans did, but when Hye had been small Mother had once told her that her family had once titled her Borean Longsorrow. She was tall and slender, her hair was black like Hye's but her skin pale and smooth, and her eyes dark eyes larger than any human's. Tae said that Mother moved like a blade, carving through life, and sometimes Hye thought she knew what he meant. It was in the way she moved, like the world had to get out of the way or else it would get cut.

The girl had gotten lost in her thoughts, a little bored waiting, so when her mother flicked her forehead she nearly fell from her chair.

"I see how it is," her mother said. "I leave for a month and suddenly my own daughter ignores me."

"Tea is stupid," Hye told her. "So it's your fault."

Mom laughed while her father glared at her from the corner of his eye. He took tea pretty seriously.

"You're growing quickly, Hye," her mother said. "Every time I leave you seem to have shot up another inch."

"I'm going to be taller than you," she swore.

"We'll see," Borean smiled. "Have you been practising with your bow?"

"I'm getting better," Hye said, then turned sly. "But it'd be quicker if you were there to give me exercises."

Her father snorted.

"Is that so?" Mother lightly said.

"Maybe you should live with us on the Tortoise again," Hye innocently suggested. "Like when I was little."

Mother shot a look at Father, who looked very amused.

"We can talk about it after this year's festival," her mother said.

"You've been on so many trips lately though, and for so long," Hye whined. "You never did that when I was a kid, you never even left the ship without Father."

"It is only natural that a young couple's heart should be as one," her father drawled. "Alas, time passes. But perhaps your mother will not tire of me entirely for a few years yet."

"Or maybe this will be the year, Iseul," Mother smiled, then sipped at her tea.

Hye could tell when a conversation was over, so she asked about the trip instead.

"Did you find the ship you wanted?" she asked.

"Caught up to it in the middle of the storm," Mother told her. "It was already sinking, I had to drag out the missionary to interrogate him."

Some Yan Tei priest, Hye knew, from across the sea. Sometimes they came to Calernia, probably because they were tired of losing battles to the Asadal.

"Interesting news of home?" Father asked.

"The House Wars are still raging and have grown even bloodier since last century," Mother smiled, lean and mean. "The massacres are dragging in the ancestor families on all sides, so now elves are fighting each other as well."

She sounded deeply satisfied. Mother had not left the other elves on good terms, Hye hadn't need to be told that to figure it out.

"We warned them that reckless breeding would cost us dearly," Mother said. "But did they listen? No. Let them reap what they have sown."

Father rolled his eyes. He always did that when they talked about elves, because he didn't take them very seriously. Said it was a good thing they'd burned their fleet after coming to Calernia, because the ships had been fit only for firewood.

"Anything of Asadal?" he asked.

"The Yan Tei attempted invasion and were turned back at the Mountain Gate," Mother said. "The Western Fleet sacked a few coastal cities in retaliation. That and the usual games in the Closed Sea."

That put her father in a good mood, he always liked to hear about the Yan Tei losing at war, so after they finished the tea talking about little things. Father left after a bit to ensure their ship would set sail while the wind was at their back, leaving Hye to talk with her mother. Which was fine, because a question had been burning at her throat for an hour now.

"Mothe," the girl said. "You know that thing you do when you walk on water?"

"Assertion," her mother stated. "What about it?"

"Will I be able to do that too when I'm older?" Hye asked.

"No," Mom bluntly replied. "You are only a halfblood."

"You said there's a bunch of other half-elves across the sea, though," Hye pressed. "Not one of them could do it?"

"Perhaps if one lived long enough they might succeed," her mother mused, "but I've known few to last longer than a millennium. It is not done."

"There has to be a trick to it," Hye pouted. "I'll figure it out one day."

"It's not a trick, Hye, those come from outside," Mother said. "Assertion, the act of asserting yourself on the fabric of Creation, it is..."

She trailed off.

"It is to perfect an aspect of yourself in a way that not even the world can resist," she finished.

That didn't help at all, but Hye nodded to pretend it had. Mother asked about her lessons after, because she never liked talking about elf stuff much.

"Tae's been on my back a lot lately," Hye said. "I think he's practising."

"For what?" Mother asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"His wife is pregnant again," Hye said. "He says it's going to be a boy."

"How many does that make now?" she snickered.

"Five," Hye said. "You know, some of the old crew say that Father should have more kids too. That it shows favour from the Gods when a man has many children."

"You have at least a dozen half-siblings across the sea, daughter," Mother reminded her. "Though as far as I know you are the only issue he ever personally raised."

"It's not the same though," she said, wrinkling her nose. "I think I'd like a little brother. Sometimes I have to carry too much stuff around."

"Family is complicated, petrel," Mother lightly said. "And I have never done well with siblings."

"You left 'cause you argued with yours," the girl slyly said.

Mother looked surprised so Hye grinned. She'd overheard the crew talking, but she hadn't known if it was true until now.

"Close enough, I suppose," her mother said. "I killed all seven of my sisters."

Hye gasped. That wasn't what she'd heard at all.

"Was that in the war?" she asked.

"The first I slew in a duel," Mother said. "I believed that we needed strict laws, Hye, to prevent disaster. That elves should have no more than three children with humans and any who went over that number should lose the right and have all mixed descendance removed from Creation. My eldest sister had already founded five families and she took my beliefs personally. We settled it with blades."

"Then the rest got angry 'cause you won," Hye guessed, frowning. Sore losers.

"There was only one side left for me in the war after that and it was not theirs," Mother shrugged. "They sought me out on the battlefield and fell short until none were left. If I had not sailed with the Wise King my mother likely would have sought to kill me as well. That match I would not have won."

Hye solemnly nodded. Her grandmother had taught her mother the sword, like her mother would one day teach her.

"I'm your only kid, though," the girl pointed out. "So you could still have two more."

"One is enough for me," Mother smiled, ruffling her hair. "Any more and I fear the King would take personal offence."

"He sounds like a prick," Hye opined.

Her mother snorted.

"He is ancient and powerful," Mother said. "His grandmother woke with the First Dawn, and even more dangerous than his magic is his foresight. He knew we would lose the war long before we did, it is why we had the ships to cross the sea."

"Still sounds like a prick," Hye honestly replied.

Mother laughed, and that was that.

—

Relic Reef was deep in the Tideless Isles, and it was the secret port where Admiral Iseul's fleet made its home. There was a large hidden island behind the maze of reefs and the strange stone pillars that the waves sometimes revealed, and a small town on it. Hye's mother said that the pillars were a wonder of magic, the reason while the tides around here were so strange.

"Titan's work," Mother had said. "Not power to trifle with."

Every year the entire fleet came back here for a week, all the crews and ships spreading across the beaches to celebrate what they called the Festival of the Hunt. Hye had been told by some it was about the ships taken during the year, the captains boasting about their prizes, but Tae always avoided answering when she asked him so there must be more to it. Besides, her parents did that strange ceremony every year after everyone got drunk where they stood on a beach and it looked like they were about to duel but never did.

A lot of the wives and husbands who lived on the Reef all year long thought it was romantic, like a sort of pirate wedding, but older sailors said it wasn't that. They'd been doing it for nineteen years – twenty this year – and Hye was only nine. She knew her parents hadn't always liked each other before she was

born, so it wouldn't be that. This year the festival seemed larger than ever, probably 'cause the fleet was the largest it'd ever been: twenty-nine ships if you counted the Ashuran trader that'd been dragged in by the Tortoise, and Hye thought you should.

There were hundreds of people on the beach, from all over Calernia, and even more in the town that'd been carved out from the island rocks. Hye's father would be out with his captains until late and her mother didn't like crowds, so it was Tae who took care of her after spending some time with his family. He took her to the beach games, but a few times they took a detour so he could buy a bottle of strongwine. He was getting very drunk, Hye thought, and very quickly.

"Are you sure it's safe if you drink this much?" she asked him.

He'd never done that before even when he drank.

"Tonight, child, you're the only safe person on this island," Tae said.

She frowned at him. Part of why she needed a keeper was in case someone tried to get at her father through her.

"I don't get it," Hye admitted.

"The seal was supposed to last fifty years, but Lady Borean is powerful as any sage," Tae sighed. "She's been going further away and for longer. She'll break it tonight, I'm sure."

"What seal?" she asked.

"Two hearts as one," Tae laughed. "She was going to pluck us out for news like that poor Yan Tei fuck in the storm, but the Admiral tricked her. One dies, so does the other. And if she touched any of us he'd trigger the seal."

"You're lying," Hye hissed. "They're in love."

Tae smiled sadly.

"We'll know by the end of the night, girl," he replied.

He was a filthy liar, so she kicked him and ran away. He was too drunk to catch her when she went into the crowd, so Hye went off on her own and hid. It was a lie, had to be. It was getting darker out though, and she knew what that meant. The ceremony on the beach. She snuck in with the crowd when it began to gather, keeping away from the people looking for her. Her parents were on the beach already, facing each other. They both had swords in hand. They frowned, looking at each other, until finally there was some sort of *snap*. Hye felt it and the crowd did too, murmuring uneasily. It'd never happened before.

"Twenty years to the day," Father said, smiling. "I had not thought that possible."

"You might have stretched it out if you had a sage around," Mother replied.

Their eyes met.

"And now?" Father asked.

"Now we balance the score," Mother replied.

She struck, moving faster than Hye had ever seen anyone move and Father parried the blow just a little too late. There was a long cut across his cheek. Hye froze in terror and grief as Father received one wound after another, never landing so much as a blow. One, two, five, eight – and then, after she slashed across his torso shallowly and scored her eleventh wound, Mother took a step back. Father watched her, face unreadable.

"And the nine left?"

"Those I liked," Mother easily said. "So it is now a done thing."

She flicked away the blood and sheathed her blade. There was still a lot of confusion in the crowd but it looked like it was over and no one was dead, so when someone started cheering soon after everyone was. A lot of the older crew looked pathetically relieved. Hye ran out of the crowd to her parents, hovering around her wounded father but afraid to hug him, and he lightly patted her head.

"No need to cry, petrel," Father smiled. "I knew she wouldn't be able to resist keeping me around."

Mother rolled her eyes at him, but she did not say otherwise.

—

After all the excitement Hye had gone to bed exhausted, but she woke up in her bed in the middle of the night. There was something wrong. Somehow she could feel it, there was something wrong. Throwing aside her covers she dragged on her boots and left the house, the full moon's light shining down like a lantern. None of the crew were guarding the house, that was the wrongness she picked up on. There was always someone around the house, especially if she was in it. So she took the streets, and there the stench had her emptying her stomach on the stones. Blood, so much blood. And there were bodies *everywhere*. Every house, every street, and when she ran down to the beach it was like a sea of corpses. Even the ships were drenched in red, like someone had moved inch by inch across Relic Reef and taken every life.

Hye never saw the blade until it was slapped away from her neck.

Without so much as a whisper of warning Mother was standing in front of her, and four people in cloaks faced her. Mother had a sword in hand and her shoulders were tight.

"Try that again, Dusk, and I'll cross the sea to butcher every single kin you have left after I'm done with you," Mother coldly said.

"Abomination," one of the strangers spat. "He sends us to bring you home and we find you have waded in *filth*."

"Run back to the Golden Bloom, Dawn, before I decide you're in need of a refresher in manners," Mother retorted. "You should remember how the last one went."

"Mother," Hye whispered, "who are they?"

"Old students of mine," she replied. "Who forget I named the Emerald Blades because they are still so very *green*."

"You cannot defend both her and your... pet," a stranger said.

"No," Mother agreed. "But if you take either of their lives, I'll kill all four of you afterwards."

Hye hid behind her mother, gripping at the red coat. Silence stretched out.

"We will return," the Emerald Sword said. "All of us."

"Tell him the Wise King tonight counts as my resignation," Mother replied, unimpressed. "He can find himself another champion."

And then they were gone, just as suddenly as they had appeared. Almost like it'd all been a dream, except that the stench around them would not let Hye believe that even a moment. Mother stood there for a long time, then sighed. Her shoulders loosened and she lightly rested her hand on her daughter's head.

"Come, Hye," she tiredly said. "If I know your father, he's found us a ship to sail off this island by now."

—

She'd been right.

It was not a nice ship. It was small and dinky and it stank of old fish. But they would be able to sail it with only three people and take some things with them. Hye took her bow and her arrows, nothing else. What would be the point, when all it took was a blink of an eye for it to be gone? Everyone she knew was *dead*.

"Where to?" Mother asked, pushing their boat into the water.

"Well," Father hummed, pulling at the sail, "I stole some Praesi state secrets two years back. They should buy us refuge in Ashur for a time."

Just for a time, she thought. Was it going to happen again, tonight? Was she going to find another world and one night wake up to find it had been slaughtered?

"And after that?" Hye asked.

"After that," Mother softly replied, "the hunt continues."

Challengers

"To be good?

An empty boast.

To be good at!

There is the glory,

even in devilry."

– Extract from the play "I, Triumphant", author unknown, banned by decree of the Tower under Terribilis II

Rosalind hadn't been a Fairfax until there were no Fairfaxes left. She still remembered the knight that'd taken her away and brought her to the monastery, grim and silent and hidden by the visor. She'd grown to love it there, growing up in the gardens with the Brothers and Sisters, but she would not forget that she had been an *embarrassment*. That it would have been scandalous if Good King's Robert own cousin was known to have fathered a bastard, so Rosalind must be spirited away in a small monastery in the southern reaches of Callow where she wouldn't get in anyone's way.

Much as she still resented that, it had likely saved her life.

Lord William, his wife and their two children were all dead. The Calamities had butchered even the four-year old boy, when they took Laure. But no one had known that Rosalind existed, so no black-clad killers had ever come knocking at the gates of the monastery in the middle of the night. Not, Brother Harlan had told her, that she would have been given up if they had. Lord William had chosen for her upbringing a monastery where more than a few knights had retired, perhaps intending to throw a knighthood her way when she reached the right age.

They would have fought for her, Brother Harlan said, not only because she was now the rightful Queen of Callow but because she was as much their daughter as anyone of their blood. And their conviction had sunk in her, Rosalind thought, for *someone* needed to save kingdom. The Praesi were still taking tallies and establishing taxes, for now, but it was only a matter of time until their 'imperial governors' revealed themselves as cruel tyrants. Rosalind must stop them before it was too late, and that meant rising in rebellion.

And for that, when Harlan – once Ser Harlan, Grandmaster of the Sleeping Lions – had laid the blade on her shoulders she had not risen to her feet a simple knight but instead the Rebel Knight. Eleanor Fairfax's own Name, she had been told. Her fate was to be one of resurrection, bringing back Callow into a golden age as her ancestor had long ago. Resurrection apparently began with a lot of riding around, though, because that was what she'd been doing since leaving the monastery.

"You're sure that Countess Elizabeth will help us?" Rosalind asked.

Brother Harlan stroked his beard, which though white had lost none of its luster – much like the man himself had lost little vigor or muscles even though he was in his sixties.

"The Countess Marchford is ambitious but she loves this country," Harlan told her. "She might insist that you be betrothed to one of her family – I believe her nephew is her heir and the ages are close enough – but she *will* rise for a Fairfax. Of that I have no doubt."

And the Countess was wealthy, Rosalind had been told, because of the silver mines in the hills she ruled. Coin would be needed, if the Rebel Knight was to begin raising an army. That was what had the five of them riding north at night, Rosalind and her mentor and the companions she'd found since leaving the monastery. Jack and Jane, the ever-smiling twins from Liesse that always seemed to know more than they should and showed wicked skill with knives, and Lucian. A stuck-up ass of a squire, who though unseasonably handsome kept picking at every decision Rosalind made.

She was pretty sure he was some noble's son, even if he insisted otherwise, because he kept being surprised at all sorts of common things.

And, surprise of surprises, he rode up to her side the moment Harlan stopped talking. It'd been pretty obvious he was eavesdropping the whole time, as he often did. The pretty boy offered her a smirk.

"Do not worry, Rosalind," Lucian said. "I have been to Marchford before. When your etiquette fails, you can rely on me to avoid disaster."

"That'll be the day," Rosalind replied, rolling her eyes.

Gods Above, if the squire would just shut up and be pretty this journey would be so much more enjoyable. Harlan looked disapprovingly at the two of them, at him for his presumption and at her for the rudeness, but then he froze and pulled hard at his reins. His mount stopped, and so did the rest of the company's.

"Harlan?" the Rebel Knight asked.

"We've just entered a ward," Harlan grimly said. "Everyone, scatter."

Rosalind had been obeying him in the training yard for years, she moved without hesitation. Lucian did not, and a heartbeat later there was a plume of ash where he'd been standing. Rosalind's heart caught in her throat as she galloped away. Gods, was he dead? Just like that, *dead*? Light bloomed in the night, and a streak of red flame died against a shining shield. Harlan grunted with effort.

"To me," he bellowed. "We have to pull back to-"

Rosalind deftly obeyed, as did the wide-eyed twins a moment later, but there was a blur of motion as one of them and their horse were *bowled over*. A massive wolf ripped out the twin's hair, the horse screaming as it convulsed with broken legs.

"Jane," the survivor screamed, anguished.

The Rebel Knight could see, now what the purpose of the ward had been. It had broken, perhaps because of the Light, and now a large mounted company of armoured riders could be seen spreading out around them. The Blackguards. And at their head, riding by the side of a tall Soninke in red robes that must be the Sovereign of Red Skies himself, was a man in plain plate. The Carrion Lord himself, Rosalind realized with a shiver. Harlan moved between the two of them, Light burning in his gaze.

"Ser Harlan," the Black Knight calmly greeted him. "It appears your retirement has come to an end."

"Had me watched, did you?" her mentor growled.

"We have people in Marchford," the Carrion Lord replied. "Making contact revealed you."

To their side the Blackguards were still fanning out and Rosalind felt fear creeping up her spine. If they got surrounded...

"Run, child," Harlan quietly said.

Rosalind rocked back as if he'd slapped her.

"Harlan, *no*," she insisted. "I can't leave you-"

"I can hold them back long enough," Harlan said, back straightening. "It will be my last gift to you, Rosalind."

She choked up. He'd taught her since she could walk, taken care of her through every tantrum and skinned knee, every... He was more her father than some dead Fairfax could ever claim to be. Jack put his hand on her shoulder, pulling her back.

"We need to *go*," he said, voice raw with grief.

Around them the riders were still spreading out, moving methodically. Harlan turned to her, smiling through his white beard.

"Farewell, Rosalind," the old knight said. "Rule well."

And she ran, Gods damn her. Followed his last order even as Light bloomed like a midnight sun.

"Come on, Carrion Lord," Grandmaster Harlan of the Sleeping Lions laughed, "let's have the fight that should have ended you on the Fields."

A pause.

"All crossbows fire at will," the Black Knight mildly said. "Delay pursuit, it's pointless now – Wekesa, track her."

Whatever happened after that, Rosalind was too far to hear it. She rode her horse hard, Jack sticking close to her. But these were flatlands, and when enough time had passed that she could look behind without tears in her eyes she saw the Blackguards had resumed pursuit.

"There's a village to the east," Jack shouted at her. "Off the road. We need to hide there."

She nodded, not trusting her voice. Something was burning her belly, a rage she'd not known before. It had been a duty, driving out the Praesi, but now it was something more. It was *personal*. They took Jack's advice, the Blackguards pursuing in the distance, and before long found the village he'd mentioned. A nowhere place, wide asleep. There was nowhere in sight.

"I'll find us fresh horses to steal," Jack told her, pulling ahead. "Keep an eye on-"

The crossbow bolt took him the throat. The Rebel Knight threw herself to the ground before another could take her in the chest, but her horse was not so lucky.

"No," she wept, but Jack was already dead.

What could she do but *run*? The village was swarming with goblins in Legion armour, suddenly, and if she stopped moving she was dead.

She was exhausted when the enemy caught up to her. Rosalind was fast, but not so fast she could outrun horses. She turned around, sword in hand, to meet her enemy.

"Come fight me, coward," the Rebel Knight shouted.

The Carrion Lord studied her through his visor in silence, then simply raised his hand and lowered it. Rosalind was already running, but there was no avoiding that many crossbows. One bolt after another punched through her chain mail, every step becoming harder until she collapsed. She had not, she realized, gotten even half of the way there. The monster dismounted, a dozen soldiers following him as he approached her with his sword bare.

Rosalind tried to raise her arm, strike at him, but she was too *weak*.

"Three years," the Black Knight said, shaking his head in disgust. "Even Scribe thought we'd get six before the first of you popped out."

"I won't be the last," Rosalind gurgled out. "Damn you, *I won't be the last*."

Eerily pale green eyes met hers.

"No," the Carrion Lord softly agreed. "In every sense, child, you will not be the last."

It was mercifully quick.

—

The Scholar had heard what the monsters did to heroes in these parts, and he wasn't going to meet that fate. That was why he was drinking in a dingy tavern, sipping at stale beer, instead of trying to hook up with one of the dozen would-be rebel groups that dwelled in Vale. Julian was Callowan too, just as much as any of them, but he'd been abroad. He'd been studying in Atalante when the Conquest happened, so he had... perspective that the people who'd never left lacked. These villains weren't like the ones from the old stories, they'd take longer to drive out. Coming at them plain wouldn't work. So instead of adding his

corpse to the growing pile, Julian Evers was going to do the *smart* thing.

He'd learn everything he could about them, all their tricks, and give that information to every hero on Calernia. Time would do the rest for him.

Still, he had to wonder if it was the occupation that'd made the beer so watery. Surely an honest Callowan tavern-keeper wouldn't cut their drinks if they had any other choice, right? The brown-haired man shot a suspicious look at the man behind the counter. He'd already used **Examine** on the tavern-keeper to make sure he did not have the tattoo that marked Eyes of the Empire, so he knew the fair-haired man was at least marginally trustworthy. He leaned around one of the candles on the counter, avoiding the uncomfortable wafting heat.

"I've a question," Julian said, "if you have a moment."

"Maybe if you order another beer," the tavern-keeper mildly replied. "You've been nursing that tankard all evening."

Fair enough, the Scholar thought with a sigh. He ordered again, setting aside his old tankard and sipping at the new one in a gesture of goodwill. It was significantly better, he noticed, and took a deeper swallow.

"Do you cut your beer, by any chance?" Julian asked, stroking a finger against **Examine**.

The blond man puffed up, looking offended.

"Of course not," he replied.

A lie, Julian saw. His aspect wasn't entirely foolproof, it tended to get caught up in details, but it saw clearly through most situations. Besides, particular attention to detail was only natural for someone who'd studied in Atalante: the philosopher-priests had quite literally invented the discipline of semantics.

"So yes," Julian drily said, "but not this one."

The tavern-keeper glared.

"Fine, there might have been water in the first," he admitted. "But not your second."

Truth, **Examine** told him. Julian took another swallow.

"What do you want, stranger?" the tavern-keeper asked.

"Your advice," the Scholar said, smiling at the knowledge he now held the advantage. "I have been thinking of heading to Summerholm, but I hear the place is swarming with Praesi."

"Largest garrison in Callow," the other man agreed. "What about it?"

"I can deal with soldiers," Julian shrugged, "but is it true that the Calamities often go there?"

He hoped so. Finding employment, laying low for a year or two and then begin quietly gathering information was his plan but it would only work if he could find a place where at least some of the villains regularly spent time. The Black Knight had not taken up a city as the capital of the occupation, unfortunately, which made the business tricky.

"Way I hear it, the Black Knight blows through every few months," the tavern-keeper said. "And the Captains' supposed to stick to him like glue, yeah? Don't know about the others."

The Scholar hummed. One tavern-keeper was not a certainty, but it was a start. He'd moved around, ask in other places after having changed his appearance like he'd done in Dormer. He offered the blond man his smile and thanks, then set about finishing the rest of the tankard out of politeness. Best not to be rude, it risked making him into a story to be peddled. Only when he was halfway through, he felt a sudden and vicious cramp. Julian looked down. His limbs were trembling, he saw, and he dropped to the floor.

He had, he realized with horror, been poisoned.

Distantly, he heard a few screams and people running out of the hall. Footsteps too, large, but his eyes were on the candle on the counter. Burning, he thought. Destroying impurity. And what poison, if not that? He focused, feeling the life leak out of him, and thought of a flame. Of it scouring his veins, destroying all evil. A hulking shape leaned over him. Not a woman, he dimly thought, for what woman could possibly be so *large*?

"Did you just learn to burn out poison on the fly?" the Captain said, sounding impressed. "It's not even that common a trick."

"I," the Scholar gurgled out, "you won't get away with-"

"You certainly didn't," the Captain said, raising a great hammer. "We lost you after Dormer, Scholar, but if you keep using dives for information then it's just a waiting game."

The hammer came down.

—

It'd all begun when a wolf king had come out of the Waning Woods and begun to raid farms. It'd not exactly caused a panic, since it or something like it happened every few decades. The tale was well-worn: some fae lord came into Creation, played court with

some animals enchanted to talk and then when they got bored and abandoned the whole affair. Leaving the territory closest to the woods, the Barony of Dormer, to deal with the aftermath. The wolf kings were the worst of the lot, what with the way they gathered large packs and went after cattle single-mindedly, but it was nothing that Baroness Anne's knights wouldn't be able to ride down.

Only this time the fae had decided to go for broke, and horse-sized fox that spoke in rhyme had attacked the knights' camp as they slept, tearing through them while they were unarmoured. The fox – a vixen, to be precise – had all the while been telling them that she was truly a princess and that the only way to be free of her curse was to slay as many men as there were days the enchantment was meant to last, but the good people of Dormer took that one with a grain of salt. Everyone's grandmother had a story about some frog-prince who'd ended up being a badger with delusions of grandeur or a cousin who'd freed a buck only to find the promised treasure was a pile of acorns painted gold.

The survivors from the attack had sent for reinforcements and gathered the dispossessed farmers in a small town called Strawthorn, walling up there until the baroness' troops could arrive. Blake had gone out to help, of course he had. He might have left behind his life as a Brother to marry Sawyer, but he was still a healer at heart. So long as he could wield Light, he'd pitch in when Evil came calling in one form or another. Sawyer hadn't argued, one of a hundred daily reminders of how he'd made the right decision upending his life to be with her, and instead hung her apron to belt on her sword.

That nasty business with her father had ensured that Sawyer Halcroft would never be a knight, but her years abroad as a mercenary had taught her entirely more practical skills.

They were a month in Strawthorn, Blake to heal the sick as he ignored the side-eye from the priests and Sawyer spending her days training the town's fledgling militia under the disapproving gaze of the Dormer knights. His wife was teaching them Free Cities spear tactics, not a proper Callowan shield wall, which while more likely to save their lives was apparently lacking in patriotism on her part.

"Never mind that a shield wall that green will melt away like summer snow the moment wolves run at it," Sawyer grouched at him in private.

Just as they began to get restless, however, word came from Dormer: another force had been assembled and was on its way. Darker news came too, to everyone's dismay: rumour had it the Carrion Lord had taken an interest and might be headed this way. Hopefully it was really just be a rumour.

"It probably is," Sawyer reassured him. "If you listen to gossip, the man's bloody everywhere."

"I won't mind that," Blake said, "so long as it's everywhere but here."

The Calamities might not have been the kind of tyrants he'd expected them to be, but they were harsher in doling out punishment than the Fairfaxes had ever been. Best not to draw their attention at all if you could, that was just plain sense. The two of them made plans to leave Strawthorn when the reinforcements arrived, deciding it was best to get gone before they could get caught up in the inevitable pissing match between the Dormer soldiers and the Praesi.

Only they didn't get to, because the wolf king came straight at the town. No one had expected it, because the creatures never did that. It might have a crown seared onto its head, but it was still a wolf: those didn't attack towns, or even most villages, unless hunger made them *desperate*. The knights were caught with their pants down again, although even half-dressed their core of veterans made a bloody fight of it, but things were looking *bad*.

"I need to form up the militia," Sawyer hissed at him. "Can you-"

Blake kissed her.

"Go," he said, and she did.

He should have gone with the priests, readied himself to heal the wounded, but a doubt was niggling away at him. Why would the wolf king act this way? Following a faint instinct, he headed for the House of Light and there found his answer: the great fox, trying to force open the gates. Around her neck hung the limp and bleeding body of a she-wolf.

"You took the wolf king's consort to draw him here," Blake said, fingers clenching around his staff. "Why?"

The fox turned to look at him, smirking as much as an animal could.

"Poor priest, blinded and crossed

Knowing not what was buried and lost

I came here cunning, and will have my bite

Of that old treasure made of Light."

Blake stared her down.

"Your metre's terrible and your rhymes second rate," he told the monster.

It did not take kindly to that. But even though he was no longer a Brother, he was still a wielder of Light and standing near the threshold of a House. When he called it to him it came strong and easy, burning at the great fox's fur until it yelped and ran away. The vixen was a coward at heart, it was why she'd gotten the wolf king to do her dirty work, and in the haste of her flight she abandoned her unconscious prisoner. In the distance Blake still heard the screams and howls of battle, the wolf king still attacking desperately to claim back his consort, and the healer hesitated.

The fox had revealed that some manner of artefact lay underneath the floor of the House, something powerful enough the creature had desired to devour it for power. If he claimed it, he could drive away the wolf king. But though Blake was no longer a priest, he had not forgotten the lessons of the Book. *If the choice is between lighting a candle and a pyre, ever choose the candle: to save is a greater act than to destroy.* So instead Blake knelt by the she-wolf and laid a gentle hand on her side, Light blooming around her pelt. Her breath steadied, and she woke. Too-clever eyes met his and he smiled.

"Let us end this," the healer said.

And they did. The fight went out of the wolves the moment the two of them arrived, and Sawyer ordered the wall of spears to part so they could pass. The two wolves reunited, lovingly rubbing their cheeks together, and Blake's heart clenched. He glanced at his wife, who was looking back with a small, secret smile. The wolf king took a few steps towards him, nervous townsfolk raising their spears, but the crowned wolf did not attack: it bowed its head down in thanks before rising again, eyes expectant. Blake knew his stories, like all good Dormer boys. He was being offered a boon.

"I ask," he said, "that you no longer attack humans and their cattle, Your Majesty."

The wolf king stared him down with amber eyes, then curtly nodded and trotted away. The large pack, nearly sixty wolves even after all the deaths, followed in his wake. Blake slumped, the wind gone out of him now the danger was passing, and might have collapsed if Sawyer had not come to help him up. It was over, finally. The townsfolk cheered themselves hoarse, and that night a feast was thrown. The couple stayed two more days, long enough that Blake could be satisfied there would be no one who died from their wounds, and as they did they felt a... change.

The townsfolk and even the knights had begun calling Blake a wise healer, and the words were beginning to have *weight*. Almost like a title. And Sawyer, who'd been offered by the town elders to stay on as captain of their militia, had begged off by telling them that though a mercenary she was now retired. The words stuck

to her too, the way she got called the retired mercenary. The both of them feared the change, and decided it was time to get gone. They could ride this out at the bakery, piece together what was happening.

Just to be safe they did not wait until morning to leave, riding out in the night and finding a roadside inn to stay at. The rooms were full so they had to sleep in the stables, but neither of them minded. It wasn't their first night roughing it, and they settled together in the hay.

The woke up to a bright light being shined into their faces.

Sawyer was on her feet in a heartbeat, sword clearing the scabbard, but it was caught by another blade. As Blake struggled to get up, reaching for his staff, he saw his wife getting headbutted by a man in plain plate, the crunch of the steel helmet on her forehead a wound to his heart. She reared back in pain as Blake called on the Light, letting loose a bolt, but the man moved out of the way with a dancer's grace. Sawyer struck again, but the stranger was so fast – he slapped aside the thrust and his gauntleted fist struck her in the mouth, smashing her back down into the hay and breaking teeth.

"Robbers," Blake shouted, drawing on Light. "You fools, even if the baroness doesn't get you the Legions w-"

And then froze, because the man had not come alone. The stables were full of soldiers in plate but no heraldic markings, and there was only one company in all of Callow that wore such armour: the Blackguards. The Carrion Lord's personal retinue.

"No," Blake got out. "*Why?* We haven't done anything."

Under the visor he saw pale green eyes studying him, the violence pausing. Gods, let them be able to talk their way out of this.

"We don't want to fight you," Blake desperately said. "I swear. We want only to leave, to return to our bakery. We're not *rebels*."

"I know," the Black Knight said, and he sounded sounding genuinely sorry. "But that is only in the immediate. Should I leave you alone now, fate's wheels begin spinning."

"We have no quarrel with the Empire," Sawyer croaked, down in the hay.

"Not today," the monster said. "But eventually an imperial governor will wrong you, or a legionary's carelessness, and when that anger reaches a boil another hero will show up."

The man sounded vaguely irritated.

"Someone young and strong, with potential but little experience, who would need companions like a wise healer and a retired mercenary to reach the fullness of their power," the Carrion Lord said. "By then, it will be too late. This is best nipped in the bud before the band of five begins gathering."

"You're *mad*," Sawyer hissed through her broken teeth. "This is all nonsense, you've just gone rabid and-"

A sense of immediate danger blared across Blake's mind, but the Carrion Lord was not moving so what could possibly be the cause of it. *Oh, Merciful Gods*, the Wise Healer realized. *He wasn't really talking to us, it was just a distraction so the Warlock could-*

The last thing Blake ever felt was the scent of burning brimstone.

Tomb

"Hatred is more reliable than love for even good men may become ingrates but few will renounce a grudge. To make hatred for the sake of being loved is to trade iron for tin."

– Extract from the treatise "On Rule", author unknown (widely believed to be Prince Bastien of Arans)

General Rumena'ivedran'ikole had always hated Great Perun.

It was a pustule of a city, once a hole in the floor but later grown fat off tunnel tolls to Holy Tvarigu. And fattened it had, until spilled out of its first cavern to fill three more. Like a greedy worm it devoured stone and soiled the walls, spilling out ever more murals and poetry and shrines and backstabbing *ladar* that killed each other over possession of said murals, poetry and shrines. Worst of them all were the Kurosiv, the *jaklavar* who ruled over the snakes and had since their ancestor had the wisdom to kneel to the Twilight Sages when they began the great work of binding together the Firstborn as one.

Kurosiv fancied himself a warrior, though he had never served in any of the Empire's armies, and Rumena would admit he was fitter for violence than most the snakes. He was also more poisonous than most of his breed, which made it all the more unpleasant than Rumena needed something of him. Jaklavar Kurosiv had insisted on drinks and a game of *inic cin* as they spoke, as if they were scholar-swords trading flatteries before trading blood, but that was only to be expected from a vain fool that wore family paint as if it was still the Bleakness. Gold and water-black, painted as carefully as if his face were a shrine to the Veiled Gods.

Rumena slapped down his Crow tile by the dark river, though he had neither the Sister nor the Cadaver to give it worth.

"You play impatiently, General Rumena," Jalkavar Kurosiv said. "Are you in such a great hurry to pass through Perun?"

The Maw tile was slid down by the Flowers he had placed earlier, a strange choice. Even if Kurosiv won the entire quadrant, the Flowers made it worth only a third of the points.

"I am," General Rumena plainly said. "As I have told you-"

"You are summoned to Tvarigu, yes," Kurosiv idly said. "Only the Sages have not called for your army as well, have they?"

"They have," Rumena lied. "It is to be dissolved and used for parts."

"I would not blame the Sages for such a decision, after the string of defeats in Lidera," Kurosiv mused. "The first of the colonies, lost to the nerezim! A hard shame to bear, I am sure."

"A burden I am eager to put down," General Rumena curtly replied.

The Waters tile propped up the Crow by the dark river. He drew another, the Stone, and hummed. Lucky, it was the strongest tile that did not change.

"As are the Twilight Sages," Kurosiv smiled. "I am told they have decided to slay you so a more trustworthy general may be granted your soul and learn from your mistakes. Who interesting, knowing this, that you insist your army must follow you to Holy Tvarigu."

A pause, the smile widened.

"Even more so that the Sages have sent order that your army should pass the walls of Great Perun under no circumstances," the jaklavar added.

Rumena tensed, but no soldiers flooded the room. Instead the other drow placed the Fire by the Flowers, another worthless tile. The pattern in the quadrant was almost finished.

"You are not powerful enough to oust the Sages alone," Jalklavar Kurosiv said. "Who is it you stand under, general?"

Ah, the general thought. A snake to the end, loyal to no one but himself.

"Does it matter?" Rumena replied. "If I cannot pass, I must storm Perun. Even if we do not win, you can only lose."

The Stone went down under the tip of the dragon's tail, ending and winning the quadrant.

"I have no interest in losses," Kurosiv said. "Only gains. And what is it that you and your friends offer for my help, General Rumena?"

"Opportunity," Rumena said.

The jaklavar waited, but no more came. The general did not trust himself to lie and not be seen through. There would be no more empire, after the Sisters were through in Holy Tavrigu. Rumena would not make promises that would not be kept.

"Interesting," Kurosiv murmured. "You mean to kill them all, then."

The general's shoulders tightened again.

"You may pass," the jaklavar suddenly said.

His surprise must have shown, for the other drow laughed.

"You would undo the great work," Kurosiv said amusedly. "Return us to the nights of the Bleakness. So why should I stand in your way?"

The painted jaklavar held a tile in his hands, flipping it between his fingers.

"Great Perun is a mighty city," he said. "Its territories have wealth and armies and food. It will grow even mightier, when the wars of the Bleakness begin again. It seems I gain from your plans, after all."

But there was a glint in Kurosiv's eyes, a glint Rumena recognized from officers that wanted to rise quickly and at any cost. The other spoke of might, but he sought more than that. *You think to make yourself emperor*, Rumena thought. A conceit, but a useful one.

"Then I take my leave," General Rumena said. "There is a long march ahead. Shall we end the game here?"

"It is already over," Kurosiv smiled.

He placed down a tile between the Maw and the Fire, still by the Flowers, and Rumena frowned. The Izmej? It was a middle tile, no worth much outside of some obscure pairings and tripartites.

"It the rule in Perun that the Izmej, when touched by Fire and Flowers, makes the dark river worth no points," Kurosiv said. "It appears there are no longer enough tiles for you to be able to win, general."

"I know the of half the cities in the empire," Rumena said, "and never have I seen this one before."

Kurosiv smiled at the Izmej tiled, then at the general.

"Why would I care," he asked, "to play by anyone else's rules?"

—

After the Night fell, madness spread across the Ever Dark.

The Gloom kept the nerezim out but all that meant was that the Firstborn were trapped with themselves. Angry, afraid, lost. And as the word spread that Night could be taken from others, that killing allowed one to rise, drow turned on drow. This Sve Noc — who all saw in their dreams, knew to be the deities of the nightmare — did not intervene against. It was the... ambitious they sent their captains against, Rumena among them.

When Cedna tried to devour all the people of Great Ilisiv, Rumena was sent to wade through the rivers of blood and put her down. The fools were not grateful for it. *Mighty Cedna*, they wept for her. *She whose might would have saved us all*. When they threw rocks General Rumena ignored it, but when knives came out there was no choice. A fresh river of blood flowed, and Night flowed into him. Sometimes he saw himself reflected on water and was surprised.

In Arov he slew three kings and their queen, ending in the cradle the empire they claimed they would raise. In Jenen he buried three hundred who had once been mages and now called themselves priests of the Veiled Gods, claiming Sve Noc to be nothing but devils. Their followers were few, but rabid. In Taslawa he smashed the Victorious Honoured Northern Army, whose general he had once called a friend. She had emptied too many cities to be forgiven. And with every victory General Rumena grew, swelled with Night even as the army turned to dust.

Soldiers grew old and died in their armour, snuffed out by time between victories, but Rumena did not age. They stayed the same.

Komena spoke in their dreams, and on they went. To follow the plan, to ensure the survival of the Firstborn. To keep the bargain with the Veiled Gods. It was twenty years and nine, until they saw Kurosiv again. Mighty Kurosiv, they were now called, for all the mighty of the Bleakness come again wore their might as the greatest of all titles. King of Perun and Korodor, but to reach for Ratia as well had been too much greed. Rumena caught their army in the back before it could rout the Ratians and drove it into Ratian spears without mercy. Slaughter to the last, to end the kingdom, until the last was Kurosiv themselves.

They lay broken on the ground, their kingdom broken around them, and rasped out breaths. They wore jewelry of emeralds and gold, so much and so thick it was almost armour of its own. Silver eyes fluttered open as Rumena approached.

"Ah, the Youngest Night's favourite," Kurosiv laughed. "An honour, that she would send you after me."

"You overstepped," Rumena said, shaking their head.

"Because some petty witches say I did?" Kurosiv scorned. "They are not gods of mine."

"Yet you use their Night," the general said.

"Not theirs," Kurosiv said. "This, of all things, I know. Their secrets are not as guarded as they think."

Komena murmured anger. Death, but first an example. Rumena did not disagree. It had been a fierce battle, fierce enough that their army might not ever recover. They reached for the crown, for the necklaces and rings and jewels, and Night flared. Gold dripped on Kurosiv and they screamed, screamed as the paint they had worn long before the customs of the Bleakness returned was painted anew in molten gold. Only when it had begun to cool did Rumena's blade rise.

"They'll use you until you break, you pathetic fool," Kurosiv rasped.

"What worth are the words of the dead?" Rumena shrugged.

"I won't die," Mighty Kurosiv laughed. "I am the izmej the heart of the tiles, *general*. I am not so easy to end."

"You are an eight year snake," General Rumena replied. "And if you return, I will slay you until you stay dead."

—

It was a hundred years before Rumena saw Kurosiv again.

It had learned patience and with it discretion, but none could escape the gazes of Sve Noc. Neither were the same when they met again. Rumena was general no longer: a sigil was not an army, even if it kept the old ranks like children playing. And Kurosiv was no king, no jaklavar. It was a scavenger, a carrion thing, and its sigil little better. They skulked through the Outer Rings, devouring weak sigils and killing each other when none were there to fight. Rumena did not question the orders of Sve Noc, but it had not understood why it had been sent to slay Kurosiv until it saw the Secret.

A handful of Kurosiv had been caught in a tunnel, brought to camp, and when they told all they knew they were slain. Only not all of the Night stayed to be harvested. A portion... disappeared. Like a bird flying home. Kurosiv had branded its sigil with a Secret, given them power, but when they perished that power returned to it and more.

"Leech," Rumena accused when it caught up to the Kurosiv Sigil, cornered them near Loklava. "You are nothing but a leech."

"I am the inheritor of the Empire Ever Dark," Kurosiv the Leech laughed, fighting better than it ever had as its sigil was slaughtered around it.

But not good enough. Once more Rumena stood over a broken body, the two of them surrounded by corpses, and it raised a blade.

"How many tombs will you make me, Rumena?" Kurosiv asked, sounding nothing more than bored.

"As many as it takes," Rumena replied, and the sword came down.

—

A century and a half passed, somehow in the blink of an eye.

The nights, the years, they no longer mattered. Rumena could hardly remember the names of its sigil, most of the time. They came and went so quickly. Only those who lasted for decades were worth the efforts. The Rumena Sigil was a bitter thing for it, but a pale shadow of the army it had once commanded. But there were no more armies in the Ever Dark. Not enough food, not enough forges — some madman was trying to kill all smiths to hoard the Secret — not enough trust. It was rare that one of the rylleh tried to kill it, but it had happened.

Rumena yet remembered a time where the title had been a rank, where to raise a hand at a superior officer would have seen you drowned in tar.

Yet it still marched, for it had sworn and though this was the work of the damned Sve Noc were a salvation, however harsh. Better the remnant of a remnant than nothing at all — and one day, they would know enough to end it. To slip the noose the Veiled Gods had slid around their necks, naming it a favour. Until that day had come, Rumena would not rest. The familiar faces that remained were few and most of them enemies, but there was a strange comfort in that. Rumena was almost pleased, when Kurosiv emerged again.

Its army was little more than rabble of nisi, but it was a great rabble. Thousands died against the walls of Great Perun, routing and returning to the slaughter in waves, but the city held. The Leech would not care, Rumena knew. It grew from every defeat, swelled from the blood whoever's it might be. Perun's sigils buckled under the numbers — and treachery, for the cabal made in defence of the city was rent with hatreds — but Rumena thought it might not fallen even if it had not come. For the second time, Rumena's warriors caught Kurosiv's army from behind and broke them on another force.

The Leech was waiting, and the fight closer than the last. Rumena's ring mail would have to be knitted anew and it had been forced to grow back an arm. Still, in the end Kurosiv lay broken on the ground surrounded by corpses and shattered hopes.

"I had not thought you would return here," Rumena said.

"Call it sentimentality," Kurosiv croaked out, for it was missing half its lungs. "If I was to take a prize, why not where it all began?"

"You will be hunted wherever you go," Rumena said, "until you renounce the Secret you hold."

"Secrets have kept me alive," the Leech said. "Despite the will of your broken idols. I will survive them."

"No," Rumena replied, "you won't."

And the sword came down.

—

The fourth time Kurosiv's sigil had grown large enough to take a city in the Outer Rings, Great Veroky.

The Kurosiv had destroyed or suborned all other sigils for days around the city, then seeded traps all over the tunnels that led to it. Rumena led its sigil through, fighting constant ambushes from the rear and sides while losing dozens a day to traps of the like it had not seen in centuries. Several times rylleh tried to kill it in its sleep to end the campaign, for the sigil was not glad of the fight. There was little Night to gain, and too many had died already.

Fighting to take great Veroky was even harsher. Entire swaths of the city were burned or collapsed to thin out Rumena's sigil, Kurosiv spending nisi and dzulu like a spendthrift to make corpses. The Mighty awaiting in the inner sanctum were more powerful than expected, especially the rylleh, and Rumena had to settle the fight itself before facing Kurosiv alone. The Leech had waited on a throne, amused, as it all happened. It only rose when Rumena approached.

"You have learned," the once-general said.

"That is the greatness of Night," the Leech said. "One can learn anything at all. And I will learn it all, Rumena, however long it might take."

They fought. They had gained in Secrets since their last conflict, and Rumena learned the Secret of Stone. If it had not, it may well have lost. Kurosiv still had little skill that was not borrowed, but it had gained in strength. Great Veroky

shattered around them, but in the end once more Kurosiv lay broken among a sea of corpses.

"Do you not tire of this?" Kurosiv rasped.

"I no longer tire, Kurosiv," Rumena admitted. "I am simply tired."

How could one tire without having been rested? It had been a long time since Rumena knew rest.

"One day we will share a tomb, I think," Kurosiv mused.

"We already do," Rumena replied. "What is the Everdark, if not that?"

And the sword came down.

—

It was only fifty years before the Kurosiv returned, and only then did Rumena understand the trap it had fallen for in Great Veroky.

Its sigil had been gutted taking the city, almost broken, but the Leech did not need years to assemble a sigil again. It only needed a mob to empower and spend. The Rumena Sigil was too weak and too few, so Rumena attacked another sigil and slew the sigil holder to claim it. The Mighty that had knelt were treacherous and unruly, however, and when Kurosiv's sigil appeared in Great Iskal the battle went bad. Some fled, others turned traitor, and in the end Rumena had to tear through the sigil along after its own ended. And at the end of that harrowing battle Kurosiv waited, smiling.

Rumena lost an arm and a leg, but these could be grown again. The sword that Kurosiv shattered with its own would not. They both fell, bodies broken and bloodied, but Rumena made itself crawl. Kurosiv could not, all its limbs having been ripped off by hand.

"Four times you have slain me, general," Kurosiv said. "Are you not yet tired of trying? It won't be enough."

"You are right," Rumena replied. "Four times was not nearly enough."

A fist went through the Leech's throat, and it was five.

—

The sixth time they fought, drow no longer called Kurosiv 'the Leech'.

The All-Knowing, they now praised it, for it knew Secrets other Firstborn had not even dreamed of. Rumena had taken its time, assembled a sigil that was not cobbled together like the last, but it was not enough. Kurosiv gained power too quickly, grew too fast and deep to be checked. The fight was lost, faster and more starkly than last time. Rumena was forced to use the Secret of Stone to bury the Kurosiv Sigil and half of Great Zorwan with it. Kurosiv came out to fight with a Secret of its own, but Rumena had been waiting for it.

It collapsed the entire cavern atop Kurosiv and Great Zorwan, then sealed it deep.

It was dead again, Rumena stayed long enough to make sure, but this time a city of the Ever Dark had been lost.

There might not be a seventh time.

—

The seventh time it was Kurosiv All-Knowing and its sigil that came for it, not the other way around.

Rumena's sigil numbered four hundred and eleven, which it decided to spend a few decades to train to fight Kurosiv as a single force before expanding the sigil into a strike force. Kurosiv brought a mob that it threw at the Rumena Sigils in waves until they had all drowned. All them were dead before an hour passed.

"Did you know," Kurosiv said after, "that they've taken to calling you the Tomb-Maker, since Great Zorwan?"

"It does not matter," Rumena said.

"It does," Kurosiv smiled. "You killed a city, Rumena. Even those sigils that were not fighting you. Now all these Mighty shiver to think they share the same fate. There are many ways to cheat fire and poison, general, but burial? Oh, all of them fear *that*."

The once-general saw the trap that it had, once more, fallen into.

"You founded a cabal against me," Rumena said.

"All will hunt you, if you remain in the Inner Ring," Kurosiv laughed. "There is only death and exile ahead."

"It will not save you," Rumena said. "Not here, not today."

"Try me," Kurosiv the All-Knowing said.

It lasted a day, the fight. Three hours in they were the only Firstborn alive in the cavern, but neither slowed. Rumena spent every Secret it had learned since the Fall of Night, even those

it had kept for moments of despair, but it was not enough. Kurosiv had learned too many tricks, too many outs. So Rumena did the only thing it still could. It pulled down the cavern on the both of them, Kurosiv triumphantly laughing all the while.

"There," the Leech happily said. "Have your seventh tomb, Rumena. There will not be another."

Perhaps not, Rumena thought. For now a cabal that spanned the most dangerous of the Inner Ring would begin hunting it. It could not afford another such fight with Kurosiv, for even if it won the other Mighty would slay it in the aftermath.

"You are still only a snake, Kurosiv," the Tomb-Maker replied, shaking its head. "And when I have my eight, you will not rise from it."

Darkness swallowed them both, the cavern falling.

—

The day after, Rumena began to walk towards the Outer Rings as hunters hurried in its trail. Great Strycht, it recalled, had once been a jewel of the empire. Perhaps it was time to see if any of the beauty yet remained and the Tomb-Maker might, at last, know some measure of rest.

Until Sve Noc called again.

Disinter

"You don't want to be the best sword on Calernia, kids. That's the one everyone's always trying to kill. No, if you want to make a career of this aim to be the fifth finest sword – high enough they pay you well, low enough no one would really gain by offing you. Maybe it's not the dream, kids, but unlike the dream it's a living."

— Transcribed lecture of the duellist Saint Armand the Old to the School of Swallows

The first rule about going into the Brocelian Forest was to trust no one and Ishaq was no fool. Before it all began, he met a man and gave him a ring.

"And yours?" the man said, sliding it down his finger.

"Here," Ishaq said, before doing the same.

—

In truth, though, it had begun three months earlier when Ishaq went to the *Sudden Death* to sell the innkeeper bundles of firewood.

Old Dina bought them at higher a price than most of the inns on the outskirts of Tartessos wood, a concession to their years of knowing each other. She was, she said, willing to pay more for a reliable man. As was his habit, Ishaq took her up on the offer to sit in the common room with an ale afterwards. He'd learned that pricking his ear as he sipped his drink could yield coin for a halfway clever man, which he liked to think he was. Like most cheap inns, the Sudden Death was thick with would-be Brocelian bands and all of them needed something. Sometimes it was even a good axe hand they were looking for, something he was willing to provide for a cut of the goods.

That night, though, he found himself staring at a sad drunk instead.

A woman, older than him by a decade and deep enough into a bottle of liquor she no longer noticed that she spat out spittle as she talked – though others did and gave her a wide berth. It was the colours painted on her cheek that first drew his eye, swirls of blue and brown with a single stroke cutting through. He knew that paint, had been told of it by his late and unlamented father: it belonged to the Spear's Blood. The woman was far from home, since their line was said to be sworn to the Champion's Blood in faraway Alava. Ishaq finished his ale, shelled out coppers to order another two and sat across the sad drunk.

"Who the fuck 're you?" she belligerently said, staring down her crooked nose.

"The man who just bought you a drink," Ishaq said, pushing the ale her way.

He'd just made a friend, at least until the drink ran out. Samira of the Fearless Spear's Blood was all too eager to spill out her life so long as her cup was full, telling him of her woes. Her uncle, the head of her Blood, had sent her on the road.

"Sent all of us out," Samira sneered. "Even his kids and grandkids. All of us on the road, because he thinks he's going to get a Bestowed out of it."

The Spear's Blood was a laughingstock, having only ever raised two Bestowed since the founding of Levant, and so Esmail of the Spear's Blood was resorting to drastic measures to make another. A widower, he had wed a beautiful but wicked woman and allowed her to mistreat his children but lost patience when the tale of their first Fearless Spear did not come to life again. Uncle Esmail, Samira told him, had then decided to send his kin into deathly peril until glory ensued. It seemed a waste of time and coppers to indulge her talk – Samira did give him the eye after a while, but Ishaq had a lover already and the drunk stank to the Dark and back – but there was something to this that'd drawn his eye so he kept the ale pouring. Altogether too much drink later,

he finally wheedled out of her why she had gone to Tartessos of all places.

"Sure, I got some old story about a treasure deep in the Brocelian but how am I supposed to get it?" Samira mourned. "No band will take me."

Because taking on a drunk in the forest is suicide, Ishaq thought, but instead of showing his thought he instead smiled at Samira through his beard.

"My friend," Ishaq said, leaning closer, "I believe we can help each other."

—

Zaray fiddled with the bronze bracelets on her wrist, which told him she was nervous even though her face might as well have been carved out of stone. The dark-haired beauty wore a green short-sleeved tunic that showed off her muscled arms, though in concession to the threat of the people they were to meet she had brought her hooked sword. Ishaq tended to find the tell endearing, but it was obvious enough he would prefer his lover settled before the others arrived.

"You have concerns," he said, tone even.

She grimaced at him.

"Several of them will be veterans," Zaray said. "They will know you are not one of them."

It was his turn to grimace. It was true that Ishaq could not truly be called an adventurer, for it was not venturing into the Brocelian that kept a roof over his head but woodcutting. He had gone out with bands for kills or treasure, but it was not the occupation of all his days.

"It is in hand," Ishaq assured her.

She touched his arm fondly, but did not seem reassured.

"Maram has led bands before and has a good reputation," Zaray told him. "I worry that he might try to become captain of this band in your stead."

He likely would, Ishaq knew, but his good reputation had brought in some of the others so it had been worth the risk.

"I tell you," Ishaq said, returning the gesture, "it is in hand."

Zaray still seemed unconvinced, but she stopped toying with her bracelets. His lover was an adventurer, a veteran of bands skilled in the use of hooked sword and spear, and like most of

her trade she tended to underestimate those who did not dedicate their life to expeditions. It was the first time he had been on the wrong end of the that doubt in their year together, though, and Ishaq found he disliked it. Before he could linger on the thought, however, the others began to arrive. There would be eight of them. He and Zaray, and of course Samira of the Spear's Blood. These were certain. After that, Ishaq had recruited by need.

First came Maram Brightblade, an adventurer of good repute known for his use of the sword and axe. His enchanted blade had earned the sobriquet He was a darkly handsome man with a scar on his cheek to whom smiles came easy and boasts even easier. He had been needed so that Ishaq could talk some of the others into the venture. As a woodsman they had a one-handed man of middle age called Rasul, a former slayer who knew paths deep into the woods. For magic they had the ragged young woman Thana the Limper, a binder washout from Malaga, and for... particular needs they had a couple. Those two were the last to arrive, ferret-faced Faris in his dark robes immediately eclipsed by his gorgeous wife Alisanne – fair of hair and blue of eye.

A round of drinks was had and bread broken, but as soon as plates were clear the challenge Ishaq had expected came.

"I've never head of you as a captain," Thana the Limper bluntly said. "And if this is as great an artefact as Samira's said, this should not be led by a greenhorn."

Samira, though she had relied on him to arrange all this, spoke not a word. As a rule, he had found she was about as loyal as she was sober. That was noticed, particularly by Maram and Faris.

"You were invited," Ishaq replied equally as bluntly, "but you are not needed. If you have objections, the door is behind you."

Thana snorted, rising to her feet to call what she obviously thought to be a bluff. She did not find the support she might have expected, though. Rasul laid his wrist stump on the table and sneered at her.

"Keep moving, girl," he said, "or shut the fuck up."

Embarrassed, the young failed binder stepped away out of pride before admitting to herself that no one seemed inclined to follow. She bent her pride and sat back down, looking at everywhere but Ishaq. Rasul's word counted for much, at the moment: he was an experienced woodsman and would be difficult to replace.

"We gather tomorrow at dawn," Ishaq told them. "Be punctual or you will be left behind."

There was some idle talk, but no second round of drinks was ordered and they band broke up. Thana was the first to leave. After Ishaq waved away Zaray, telling her to leave ahead of him as he finished his drink, she returned to the room. The mage stood before him, then cocked an eyebrow silently. Grinning, Ishaq flipped her a silver and she snatched it out of the air.

"Pleasure doing business with you," Thana the Limper grinned back.

Ishaq might not have won a fight with Maram when it came to leadership, as his lover had worried. So he'd paid for another, which he *could*.

—

The Brocelian Forest was beautiful, at least until it got you killed. Within an hour of stepping past the first tree, Ishaq's band had been twice attacked by barrow wolves and once by a snake king. Maram Brightblade unsheathed that pretty sword of his for the latter fight, slashing at the knot of furious snakes and after a flash of light carving a burning wound through the creature's heart without having ever touched it. He fell in at Ishaq's side after even as Zaray took the lead, spear in hand.

"We are making good pace," Maram idly said, sheathing the blade.

"So we are," Ishaq idly replied, hand on the handle of his axe.

The handsome killer smiled at him, which pulled appealingly at his scarred cheek.

"I get the impression," Maram said, "that you might be wary of me, Ishaq."

"You're a dangerous man, Maram," Ishaq smiled. "Why would I not be?"

"Flatterer," the other warrior chuckled. "But there is nothing to be wary of. You are leading well, though I'll confess curiosity."

"About?"

"I know of Faris," Maram admitted. "He is said to have many artefacts."

Ishaq inclined his head to the side, inviting the clean-shaven man to continue.

"But why bring in his wife?" Maram asked. "She gets a cut, same as the rest of us, but I do not see her bearing a weapon."

"He doesn't join bands without her," Ishaq replied.

The other man hummed, seemingly unconvinced even though that was the truth. They made small talk for a while more until Maram drifted away, Ishaq recognizing the conversation for what it was: the first battle line being drawn. All of them were to have equal shares of the coin when the artefact was brought back and sold to the Lord of Tartessos, but as often the way with bands of strangers already those part of it were looking to fill their pockets a little more. And what better, simpler way than to cut through a few of the people owed a cut? The first rule of going into the Brocelian was to trust no one. Rasul led them near a river which they followed until noon, when they paused to eat and drink.

Samira dropped, sweating and exhausted, and he had to ask Zaray to make sure she'd be able to march when their break ended. As he sated himself with water, ferret-faced Faris approached in his now sweaty dark robes. The other man, older and thin, wore gaudy makeshift jewelry whose centerpiece was broken stones. Shards of wardstones, Ishaq had guessed.

"The Spear's Blood will slow us down," Faris quietly said. "It isn't water she's been sneaking sips of all day."

"Only she knows the story and the map," Ishaq mildly replied.

"Knowledge is never as safe as one thinks," Faris nastily smiled. "Should you give me leave, I have a little box that will-"

"I do not give you leave," Ishaq said.

The other man was taken aback, like it was unthinkable they should not plot to murder Samira after ripping anything of use out of her memories.

"Another might," Faris warned.

Ishaq leaned forward, hand coming to rest on handle of his axe.

"Are you sure," he asked, "that you want to play this game?"

Faris swallowed.

"I meant nothing by it," the ferret-faced man hastily said.

Ishaq only smiled and Faris could not leave quickly enough. In his wake, his beautiful wife – whose practical leather tunic somehow seemed to be pretty as a tailored dress – arrived, offering a smile.

"You refused him," Alisanne smiled. "I hoped you might. I'm glad that you are the man I thought-"

Ishaq raised a finger and her words halted.

"No," he said.

She blinked, those big blue eyes betraying confusion.

"Pardon?"

"No," Ishaq repeated. "We won't be playing this game either. Walk way."

She looked more than a little offended, but their conversation had drawn eyes and she seemed disinclined to make a scene. She flounced away, and though Ishaq's gaze remained on her it was not to dip down at her swaying hips. Calmly, he wondered whether he should kill her now. She hadn't done enough to earn it, he knew, but by the time she had she'd be difficult to get to. Reluctantly, he had to admit that he'd be turned against should he strike and abandon the thought. He tore his eyes away, finding Zaray wiping her sleeve free of Samira's vomit as she shot him a dark glance. The nod he gave her was apologetic, but no more than that.

He could not show weakness, not in front of this pack of wolves.

—

Their journey was to take nine days to get there and another nine to return. Ishaq had never been so deep into the Brocelian before, but he knew the greatest of treasures were even further. The four of the Thirteen Cities that had been in what was now the Brocelian Forest were deep within the perilous land, their remains the death of nearly all who beheld those ancient walls. Gigantes had dwelled in those places along with men and the shadow of their might still lingered, less than fond of looters. Their own journey was to a lesser shrine, not as dangerous, but then the journey itself was to walk with death. And yet, Ishaq found that he was not disturbed.

Not when a flock wyverns pursued them for half a day, letting up only when Thara faked their deaths with an illusion. Not when a flicker-beast nearly killed Faris, ripping through some sort of yellow mist to almost close its mandibles around his neck until Alisanne stabbed it with a slender knife, or even when a large field of mushrooms turned into a pack of gibbering small creatures whose bite Maram told them was certain death. It made men rot from the inside, Brightblade told them as they fled east and crossed water to lose the relentless little shits. Ishaq had expected to have to master fear, but there was little of that. It felt more like a chore, like the labour of cutting wood. Over the three days it took them to get to the marker, Faris took to approaching him at meals.

"Are you sure we can trust Rasul?" the weasel-faced man asked.

When Ishaq laughed him off, he tried the same trick about Maram instead. The artefact-wielder went around their camp trying the same trick. Zaray, in their shared tent on the third night, lay her head on his chest and whispered a confession.

"He has a point about Samira," she said. "She is slowing us down, and to be slow in the Brocelian is to be dead."

"I would rather the knowledge be in Samira's head," Ishaq replied, "than in Faris' hands."

"We might not have a choice," Zaray murmured. "I've seen him talking with Maram when they think no one else is looking."

"We still need him," the bearded man replied.

"Who?"

Ishaq did not say, and she did not ask again.

—

On the fourth day they reached the marker, and as they stood over the stele of stone covered in writings none of them knew Faris swaggered forward.

"As agreed," the weasel pompously said, "you may now have my services."

He put on a broken bit of glass set in a leather strap over his eye, then pawed at the writing and hummed as he brought out a bronze table. There was a bend in the middle of the second artefact, and Faris then produced two little pointed stones – one white and one black – that he carefully pressed against specific glyphs on the stele before putting them in the bronze bend. When they began to move and Faris grinned, Ishaq let out a noise of understanding. It was a compass. Maram seemed impressed, leaning over the other man's shoulder.

"So now you use it to get us to the second marker?" Brightblade asked.

"Of course," Faris said. "Child's play, for a man of my talents. Our pet binder will have to earn her keep there, but until then—"

The movement was so smooth, so easy, that Ishaq did not realized what was happening before Faris' throat was open and the man was gurgling on his knees. Maram lightly took the compass from him, and pointed his blade as Alisanne – who'd moved even faster, silvery knife in hand and halfway to the adventurer's throat.

"Will we have a problem, Alisanne?" Maram Brightblade asked with a smile.

Blue eyes moved to Faris, who breathed his last and slumped headfirst into the grass. Red spread around him.

"I was sold into marriage," beautiful Alisanne finally said. "I will survive – and I can use his artefacts."

"Anyone can," Maram countered. "He was not a mage, I made well sure of that."

"You also killed one of our band," Ishaq coldly said.

The handsome killer offered him an insolent smile.

"Is there anyone here the bastard did *not* approach to arrange a betrayal of the others?" Maram asked.

The answering silence was telling. Ishaq's jaw tightened. If it came to a challenge now-

"I do not claim captaincy of our band, Ishaq," Maram easily said. "I simply ended a threat before it could be turned on us."

He did not like it, but a look around told him he would not win if he pushed the matter. Faris had made no friends and several enemies.

"His artefacts go to Alisanne, as his widow," Ishaq said. "Save for the compass. I will handle it."

Maram cast a look around of his own, then offered that damned smile again.

"As you say," the killer conceded.

They left before the body was cool. Afterwards, Rasul came to his side.

"He is trying to take captaincy," the woodsman bluntly said.

Ishaq hummed. That was not, in truth, his read of the situation. Maram wanted coin and he wanted a voice, but to lead? No, Ishaq did not believe he was after that. The man wanted to his second, to have a voice without the responsibilities. He wanted another thing as well, Ishaq was fairly sure, but that was a different sort of want.

"I know," he lied. "It will be handled."

Rasul nodded once, satisfied, and to the second marker they went. Faris' compass served as well as the man himself would have.

It went wrong an hour before they got to the second marker. Two days of gruelling journey had gotten them there, but in avoiding a nest of hunter-wasps they crossed into the hunting grounds of a manticore. Several of them had fought the like before, but halfway through the fight Rasul took a swipe to the face and was sent tumbling into the brush. Without his spear to keep the manticore grounded it flew up, snapping her Thana in its jaws as it fled deeper into the woods. The failed binder screamed twice, but then there was harsh crack and she screamed no more. Ishaq's eyes were not on her, though, when it all ended. They were on Rasul, who should not have been struck by that swipe.

Ah, Ishaq thought, eyes moving to another. *So that's how it is.* He went though his pack and found the packets of salt from the Titan's Pond. There should be enough.

"What now?" Ziray asked. "Thana was to unleash the second marker for us. Is the hunt lost?"

"There might be another way," Alisanne told them. "But it would require the breaking of an artefact."

Her eyes moved to the compass in Ishaq's hands. The eyes of the others were on him, expectant.

"Whatever gets us there," he agreeably replied.

When they got to the second stele, Alisanne ended up breaking three artefacts before the glyphs lit up – to her visible irritation. She then cut herself with a shard of bronze, laid it against a glyph and turned to them with a smile.

"So long as we are headed the way of the shrine, it will pull slightly at my fingers," Alisanne told them with an angelic smile. "The journey continues."

They made it to the ninth day. They were close now, all could feel it in their bones. And the urgency manifested itself in many ways, when camp was made and they retreated for the night. Rasul and Alisanne both disappeared, though a turn of the wind carrying noise made it clear what the pair was up to. Zaray glared in the direction, to Ishaq's cocked eyebrow.

"Our two guides in bed?" she said. "Bad for us, lover."

She went to bed early, in a dark mood. Samira was already snoring, exhausted by her drink as much as the day's march, and so Ishaq went to sit with Maram Brightblade. The man was polishing his enchanted sword, sitting in a corner with his back to a stone.

"I would have thought you inclined to follow our friend Rasul's lead in recreation," Maram lightly said.

"Who says I'm not?" Ishq said, leaning back against the stone.

"Your lover went to bed scowling," the handsome killer snorted. "If you can turn that around, I will offer a bow."

"Wasn't Zaray I was speaking of," Ishaq idly said, meeting the other man's eyes.

Maram stilled.

"Your looks are subtle," he said, "but not *that* subtle."

The other man slowly relaxed, then smiled than insolent smile again.

"It is the beard," Maram confessed. "I have a weakness."

"Then indulge yourself," Ishaq smiled, and turned to straddle the other.

They did.

—

The shrine was broken when they got there.

It had been a circle of stones atop a hill once, but half were collapsed and the altar at the heart of the circle lay shattered. They went around, careful not to touch the stones, and found only grass and rock. Nothing of value.

"The story says it is here," Samira of the Spear's Blood whined. "It *does*, I swear."

Angry eyes were turned on her, but Ishaq was not one of them. He had figured it out already, and suspected others had. They were keeping silent for the same reason as he was: this was about to end. He dropped his bag on the grass and, as Zaray began to argue with Samira, used the distraction to take out the satchel of salt and slide it into his pocket.

"Two of us died getting here," Rasul growled. "If there is no treasure—"

"I'll not be talked down to by a cripple," Samira sneered, reaching for her spear, and there was no taking that back.

The fight was quick, and its end unexpected. Rasul was a skilled fighter, for all that he had lost a hand, but drunk and stinking Samira still slapped him down as if disciplining a dog. The Spear's Blood expected excellence of its own. It did not save her from Zaray ramming her sword through the other woman's back. Ishaq breathed out, grieved for a moment, but all things passed. His was not a land for sentiment. So he stepped forwards as his

lover ripped out her sword, eyes still wild, and took Samira's corpse by its greasy hair. He threw it on the broken altar, blood dripping all over the stone, and a heartbeat later all of them felt a shiver in the air.

The altar was whole again, a blood-red gem resting on it surrounded by leaves a gold. Further back, at the edge of the raised stones, a pit had opened. Ishaq glimpsed bone as the bottom and hummed. As he'd suspected, the place had been built over a barrow.

"A sanguine stone," Maram breathed out. "The drunk wasn't lying."

"Enough for all of us to live comfortably," Ishaq agreed, smiling as he went around the altar.

He pushed off Samira's corpse, leaving a bloody trail on the stone, and as he did discreetly palmed the salt satchel. Hidden by the altar, he began to trace a trail on the grass and pricked his ear. Silence hung in the air between all of them, heavy with tension, and it was Maram Brightblade who broke it.

"Four cuts," he idly said. "Enough for profit."

Zaray looked uneasy, standing on the other side of the altar with a Rasul who'd gotten back to his feet with a groan – his face battered but otherwise not particularly for the worse – as Maram moved nearer to a raised stone to the left and Alisanne stayed back. Silent and unmoving. Ishaq had been waiting for the sound, and so he caught in in time. Taking a hasty step back, he threw the last of the salt on the back even as an angry scream sounded. Blue-eye, beautiful Alisanne appeared at his side. She glowed with anger and something altogether more eldritch, hitting at an invisible wall.

"A circle of salt on barrow grounds will keep a fae imprisoned," Ishaq mildly said. "Not forever, but long enough to be rid of you I'd think."

Zaray let out a bark of laughter, circling the altar to stand to his left.

"Knew she was fishy," Zaray sneered. "No one has hair that nice after nine days in the woods."

Ishaq had known it was coming since last night, planned for it, but part of him was still surprised when she tried to knife him. He caught her wrist, and a wide-eyed Maram struck to part her head from her neck. What he got, instead, was Rasul's axe in the back of the head. Maram Brightblade slowly fell to his knees, and a heartbeat later died baffled. Rasul left the axe in there and took out his knife.

"I wish it didn't have to be me," Zaray told him. "I *am* fond of you, Ishaq. But I am already wed."

"You picked me because of how much I overhear at the Sudden Death," he mused.

"And because you're so fucking clever," she smiled. "I always knew you'd find something good one day."

"Well," he mused, "at least you were good in bed."

Her eyes narrowed.

"You're too calm," she said.

"The first rule of going into the Brocelian," Ishaq said, "is to trust no one. But Rasul won't betray me, your husband or not. He *can't*."

The bearded man raised his free hand, drawing her eye to the ring he wore on it.

"No more than I can betray him," he said. "We wear oath rings."

Zaray paled.

"Goodbye," Ishaq said, reaching for the knife at his hip.

It opened her throat and he stepped back, looking away as she fell. He did not spare her a second look. A noise then drew his attention. A soft sound, with a soft clang. On the altar besides him a finger had been dropped. It still bore an oath ring on it.

"I thank you for the fae wife and arranging my divorce," Rasul said from behind him. "But you should have sprung for a necklace."

And then all Ishaq knew was darkness.

—

Ishaq woke up in the dark, bleeding out from half a dozen wounds and surrounded by death. He was dying on a pile of skulls, a fresher corpse at his side. *Samira*, he dimly realized. *They threw the both of us in the barrow pit.* Gasping, he crawled forward. There might be a way up, a way for him to do anything but fucking bleed out in a hole not having been as clever as he thought he was. Bones were digging at him, at his wounds, but he let out a ragged gasp when suddenly his hands were on stone. There was a room down here. A circle of stone on the ground surrounded by masses of dead. Already half-blind, Ishaq felt bronze under his fingers and realized there was a fresco set in the stone.

A story.

A giant raising a city, people kneeling to it. Another giant with an army, and they were worth with each other. The giants sat together at a table and beneath them a pair champions fought. They parted in peace. More of that, champions, winning, but the giant that made the city... mourned? His champion had died and the one that followed was slain. So the giant... made something. A sword, armour. And the champion began to win again, until he lost. But when he did, Ishaq felt out with a gasp, he got back up. From *death*. Desperately, Ishaq clawed at the bronze and stone. There was another piece ahead of him, a circle set in the stone, and he bled all over it.

Breathing ragged, he got the bronze circle out. Below, he felt out what he'd been looking for: more bronze. A sword and armour. Bleeding, dying, Ishaq clutched at the sword.

"Please," he rasped. "Please, you whoreson. I'll do anything."

The sword shivered in his hand, like a cat waking up. Curiosity. There was something inside of it, Ishaq felt. Power, but an ugly kind. Just a little bit left, and as the sword drank of his blood it gave him something. His breath steadied, his wounds stopped bleeding. His senses came back. It was night, he realized, and moonlight fell through the mouth of the pit. There was a fire above and two voices speaking.

"You can't do more?" he asked.

The sword sang it sadly.

"How?" he said. "How can you heal me whole?"

A whisper of an image. A man being cut, the sword drinking of something deep in him. His soul, Ishaq realized. And then he saw wounds closing.

"You're not treasure," he softly laughed. "You're a barrow curse."

Ishaq slowly got to his feet, the bronze sword in hand, and listened to the voices above. Rasul should have made sure he was dead, he thought as he began to put on the armour.

Ishaq would be certain not to make that mistake.

Scriven

"Beware the gap between the lesson taught and the lesson learned."

– Delosi saying

Eudokia mostly remembered being hungry.

She wasn't sure how she had ended up on the street, but then most of the others didn't either. They begged by the thoroughfare with worn bowls, getting coppers or scraps when they weren't being chased off by the guards, and it was a rare turn of the moon where one of them did not disappear. Sometimes they died in their sleep, the good way to go. Sometimes it was the cough or the bubbles, which were bad, but worse yet was people. Corrin had spent half a day drowning in his own blood after that guard roughed him up. It didn't get better, even when priests out in the streets said it would. They said that Delos sent coin to the city, that it would get the little beggars into houses, but it never did. Eudokia was young, but already she knew better than to believe it ever would.

The Secretariat's money always went to the walls and the nobles. No one else ever saw so much as a silver of it.

When the men came, she'd been sleeping. Hadn't had anything to eat in two days, she could barely stand. But the noise of it woke her up and she headed to the abandoned temple on the other side of the street, where a handful of men dressed like merchants were talking. She slipped in and saw they were smiling, but not the kids. The strangers were offering to take them away, to bring them to a school where they would learn a trade and become scholars.

"Three meals a day," the smiling man promised. "And a roof over your head."

The smaller kids were eager for it, but the older ones knew better. Sometimes neatly dressed men came from the nicer parts of the city, offering bargains like this one – when they bothered to ask at all – but the kids that went never came back. You learned not to ask questions and to keep with other kids when night fell, even though they might steal from you. It was better than disappearing.

"Where would we go?" a kid asked. "Where would you take us?"

"Delos, child," the smiling man said. "Far from these dirty streets."

And it was a trap, had to be, but some of the little kids went for it. Ignored the older ones that tried to hold them back. After that it was the desperate who went, and Eudokia bit her lip. Two days, since she'd last eaten. She didn't have anyone who'd share if she asked and she was starting to sleep a lot. She'd seen it happen before, how it was the beginning of wasting away. They might kill her, she thought, but it might be quick. Better than going slow, the empty belly hollowing you from the inside.

"I'll go," Eudokia said, and the man smiled at her.

—

They hadn't been chained up when they travelled by wagon, and the merchants hadn't lied when they said there would be three meals a day. Good signs, but how long would that last? Still, Eudokia couldn't remember ever eating so well and neither could any of the others. Meat and greens, sometimes with fresh olives and warm milk after. Like most kids she couldn't remember a life before the street, and there was enough hope in her that she didn't even argue when the merchants stopped the wagons by a river and told them all to go out and wash. They used soap that smelled like flowers and got to sleep in clean blankets after. One of the older boys had eavesdropped on the merchants at night and he said they were all really headed to Delos, to the great city where they said Secretariat ruled for the good of all.

A lot of them spent parts of the day sleeping, not used to eating so much or feeling so safe, and Eudokia would admit she was one. It was why she didn't see them enter Delos, she'd been napping in the back. She only woke when they were near the place where they would live and the other kids got rowdy, nervous the good times would end and taking it out on each other. The smiling man was still smiling when he told them to cut it out, that they would soon be at their new home. That, at least, Eudokia was awake for. She filed out the wagons with the others and stared curiously at her new home. It looked like a temple, she thought, but also a little like a school. It was large, though, larger than any building she'd ever seen: long and wide, with three stories and other dwellings attached.

There were walls around it, which she didn't like, but through the open gates she could see people in robes going around – some were cleaning with brooms, others carrying scrolls and there were even kids not much older than her running around playing.

"This is the School of Gulls, children," the smiling man told them. "You will live here until you are grown, learning your trade."

And part of her still thought that it was a trap, but when they were ushered in no one hit them and the people inside didn't glare. They weren't brought into the large temple-like place, instead to the smaller houses on the side, but Eudokia didn't mind. The merchants, who told them they were to be called Scholars now that everyone was part of the school, said it was because the large building was used for lessons and the dormitories of the older students. Deep down Eudokia was still waiting for the other shoe to drop, but as the weeks passed it didn't. They were fed and clothed, given beds in the small houses and brought to classrooms to be taught letters and numbers by

smiling Scholars. Eudokia made friends with some of the others, though most with Cassandra.

She was a little older, but no luckier like Eudokia she'd been starving before she came here. She had curly hair and now that her cheeks weren't hollow they were red like apples. She talked and laughed a lot, too, which Eudokia liked. She was quiet, so it felt nice to have someone that'd fill the silences.

"We never have lessons with the older kids, did you notice?" Cassandra said one day as they sat in the courtyard for their midday meal.

"They read scrolls in their classes," Eudokia pointed out. "We can't read yet."

"Maybe," the other girl mused. "Still, it's strange we see so little of them. And there's two kinds of robes they wear, did you notice?"

"I asked about that," she replied. "The blue robes are from outside, students who paid to study here. The brown robes are street kids like us, taken in."

Cassandra frowned.

"So why is it that the brown robes try so hard to avoid us?"

Eudokia didn't answer, but she figured she knew. It must be embarrassing for the students, now that they'd learned all those lessons, to be put next to ignorant kids like them when the blue robes were looking. Like being told you were the same as the kid who pissed his pants all the time. She didn't tell Cassandra, though, because then she'd smile less and she liked Cassandra's smiles. And though Eudokia let the conversation die, the curiosity did stick a little. Enough that she approached one of the blue robes after the day's lessons were over, asking the older girl if she could maybe answer a few questions. The blue robe passed a hand through her hair, sighing.

"I don't mean to be rude," she said, "but explaining anything to you might end up a waste of time for me."

Eudokia flinched, which had the older girl's eyes widening.

"I don't mean that being an orphan makes you less," the blue robe hurried to assure her. "Family can't get you through the askretis examinations if you don't have talent. It's just that you haven't gone through the threshing yet."

"The threshing?" Eudokia warily asked.

"When six months have passed, they send the slower children to one of the branch schools and keep the sharpest here," the older girl said. "About half of you will be leaving."

Not unkindly, the blue robe patted her shoulder.

"Come see me if you stick around, yeah?" she said. "I'll help you find your way in the library."

She shared what she'd learned with Cassandra that night, and the two of them only grew more determined. They'd study twice as hard and be part of the ones that stayed.

"Together," Cassandra promised. "We'll make it together."

"We will," Eudokia promised back.

—

By the time the sixth month since their arrival came at an end, all of the orphans knew what was coming. Word had gotten around, and Eudokia suspected she might not even have been the first to learn of it – the others had just kept quiet so there'd be less competition. So when one morning the entire class, all thirty of them, was taken to one of the examination halls in the back of the school everyone knew what it was about. Scholar Linos, a cheerful fat man that everyone liked, was the one who greeted them inside.

"Good morning, students," Linos smiled. "I imagine you've pieced together why you're here."

There were scattered answers, a few of them mentioning the word 'threshing' outright. Eudokia kept her silence, seated on the desk by Cassandra's.

"It is nothing to worry about," Scholar Linos assured them. "All children learn at different paces, and it may be that the School of Gulls is not the best place for you to learn. It does not mean we will abandon you."

Not a single child in the room really believed that, deep down. When the test was given – slate and chalk had been given out where answers were to be written to the questions that Scholar Linos asked out loud – all went at it aggressively, Eudokia tracing the words and numbers with methodical care. Cassandra looked like she might be struggling with additions, so she waited until Linos was looking elsewhere and showed her friend her slate. They'd make it together. When it was done they all had to set down their chalk and two other scholars came in to help Linos pick up their slates. They left, leaving the smiling fat man behind, but then someone else came. A bent old woman in brown

robes, though hers were belted with cloth of gold. The door was locked behind her.

She spoke not a word, only looking at them curiously, but even if Scholar Linos hadn't bowed at her entry the kid would have gone quiet. She felt serious, important.

"Children," the old woman said. "You may call me Crone."

Linus cleared his throat, gesturing significantly, and they all greeted her.

"I am an elder in the School of Gulls," Crone said, "here to greet you today as you truly enter it. There is one last test for you to pass, as I once did and others will after you."

Everyone leaned forward, worry and hope fighting for the reins.

"Get in pairs and stand up, children," Scholar Linus gently ordered. "You can choose your own."

They didn't hesitate: Eudokia and Cassandra shared a look and immediately rose. A few others did too, until there were only a few hesitant kids left that paired with each other reluctantly. Scholar Linus showed them all an hourglass, which he set on the desk at the front of the examination room and flipped. The sand began to pour down.

"Children," Crone said. "You have until the hourglass runs out to kill who you paired with. Anyone who does not will be killed when the sand runs out."

Disbelief rippled. Some tried to laugh, but the two adults were perfectly unsmiling. Some screamed, then and a boy made for the door. It was still locked and wouldn't move. A pair of girls moved closer to Crone, screaming to let them out, but the old woman simply backhanded the taller of the two hard enough blood flew. Jolly, fat Scholar Linus sighed and revealed a knife.

"Do not try that again," Linus warned.

Eudokia felt the shift in the air then. She took a step back, towards the corner of the room, and Cassandra – oh, to her relief Cassandra looked just as terrified and the two of them backed away, holding each other tight. It was a scarred boy that threw the first hit, striking a smaller one in the face, and it was like a dam broke. Not for everyone, there were some who backed away like Eudokia and Cassandra, but so many. More than half. After six months of steady meals and exercise, they'd all gotten stronger and so instead of petty flailing it turned murderous. Blow and strangling, kids smashing each other against desks or stepping on each other's throats.

The hourglass began to run out, and some of those that'd held back turned. Afraid of getting killed like Crone had said. Eudokia was even more scared of doing anything at all, and when the last bit of sand fell she held Cassandra close and closed her eyes.

"Eleven blooded," Crone mildly said. "A good batch."

"The streets always make them sharper than orphanages, Crone," Scholar Linos replied. "Harder lessons. Our holdouts?"

"You know our way," Crone simply said.

Eudokia's stomach clenched and at the sound of the door opening she opened her eyes. Only instead of rescue or relief it was two Scholars who came in, and they called out strange words before waving their hands.

Darkness claimed her.

—

She woke up in a cell.

It was cold and wet and she was lying on stone, but there was a bundle of warmth at her side. Cassandra, she realized. Who was still sleeping. Eudokia looked around, trying to figure out where she was, it was just a cell of bare stone leading into iron bars. Pressing her face against those she tried to have a look outside, but all she saw was a glimpse of a corridor and what might be other cells. No light. At least not until she heard footsteps coming from a distance and torchlight flickered against the walls. Eudokia hurriedly shook Cassandra awake, who opened her eyes even if she looked dazed. The steps were unhurried, so the two of them got to their feet before the Crone appeared on the other side of the bars.

"Children," the old woman greeted them.

"You're evil," Cassandra hissed. "All of you."

Crone shook her head.

"I am sinless, child," she said. "As either of you would have been, had you killed the other."

"Killing is a sin," Eudokia quietly said.

"It is the sin of the hand, Eudokia," Crone smiled. "Not of the tool. And this is what we are, here in the School of the Gull: tools. We are no more sinful than a sword or a knife."

"The Secretariat'll stop you," Cassandra defiantly said.

"They know of nothing to stop," Crone said. "Those of your class that bloodied their hands will be assigned an older brown robe to follow, and keep secret under pain of death for both. The dead will never be seen again, sent away to schools that do not exist."

"And us?" Eudokia asked.

"Your test is not finished," Crone simply said. "So it will continue."

"Fuck you," Cassandra bit out. "We won't do it. We won't kill each other."

"Not at first," the old woman agreed. "But you will receive no food until you do – and only enough water to live."

Eudokia shivered.

"Those with will, like you two, make the finest assassins," Crone smiled. "I look forward to teaching you as a true student under the School of Gulls."

And she walked away, torch going with her and leaving them to stand alone in the dark.

—

Time was hard to tell, in this place, but again Eudokia knew hunger. The two of them whispered in their cells, making plans to escape they both knew would come to nothing. They paced and slept and sometimes cried. Twice Eudokia was unnerved enough to vomit in the same pot where they relieved themselves. And time slowly crawled forward, hunger gnawing ever deeper in Eudokia's belly. She began sleeping much again. Cassandra moved more, and drank most of the water, while Eudokia's long silences turned empty. She was jealous of her friend, who still thought they would live through this. She knew better.

When her limbs began to tremble and weaken, Eudokia knew the end approached. She pulled Cassandra close against her, their shivering forms giving each other some warmth, and closed her eyes to sleep. Perhaps she would wake from this one, but it would be one of the last. Only Eudokia did wake, in the end.

With Cassandra's trembling hands around her throat.

"I'm sorry," her friend wept. "I'm so sorry, Eudokia."

She fought back, tried to claw back the hands, but Cassandra was stronger and as her vision swam she wondered if it might not be better this way. If one of them got out, at least. So she stopped fighting back, her hands coming to rest on Cassandra's shoulders,

and she closed her eyes. When the end came for her, she did not fight it.

—

The first thing she felt when she woke up was pain.

She'd just been thrown on something and it had jarred her awake. Her breath rasped out, her throat burning and feeling clogged. Her nose ran and her body ached. Then she remembered to feel faint surprised, at the fact she had woken up at all. Groping around she felt at what she was on, for she could not tell, and when her fingers closed around hair her blood went cold. Corpses. It was a pile of corpses she had been thrown on. And when Eudokia opened her eyes it was to torchlight, the night sky tall above her head and Crone's wizened face looking down at her with curiosity.

"Survived, did you," Crone mused. "She waited until her grip was too weak to finish it."

A man in Scholar's robes approached, spear in hand, and stood at Crone's back.

"Shall I finish it?" he asked.

Crone looked down, thoughtful, and Eudokia met her eyes. A long moment passed.

"No," the old woman said. "Luck is a skill too. She will not be one of us, but we have a use for her."

—

It was as if nothing had happened at all, in some ways.

Mere days later, after a sorcerer had healed her throat of the bruises, Eudokia was attending classes again. Sitting with children, some she had come to the school with but also older ones now. Cassandra was in only a few, but would not meet her eyes. Eudokia did not try to speak with her. Alone of all the brown robes she was not sent to shadow an older student. Instead Crone sent her to the front of the school, to sit with an old man in plain grey robes at a large desk.

"Scribe," the old man said. "That is my name."

"Eudokia," she hesitantly replied.

He clicked his tongue, shaking his head.

"That is a person's name, girl," Scribe said. "And neither of us are that. We are tools in the hands of others. Choose a better name, or I will choose it for you."

She hesitated. Then she thought of the pit they had plucked her out of, the pile of dead children they had thought to bury her with. The grave she had stepped out of.

"Graven," she said.

Of the grave, she had learned it meant in these very halls. Scribe peered at her, revealing startling blue eyes.

"So they haven't choked it out of you," the old man said.

Then he sighed.

"It would be safer to be broken," Scribe said. "But I will not demand it of you. Come, girl, you have much to learn."

The School of the Gull, Scribe taught her, had existed in one form or another for nearly five hundred years. It had been born in Nicae, not Delos, but after having been implicated in the death of a Basilea they had been purged from the city and fled under the rule of the Secretariat. There they had flourished, occasionally changing name or disappearing for a decade whenever they drew too much attention from the askretis – who believed they had destroyed the School three times, each under a different name.

"Assassins, they are," Scribe told her. "They call themselves Scholars but the trade is poison and the bloody knife."

"They," Graven said. "Not us?"

"You will not learn their little lessons, girl," the old man said. "You only get mine, and my trade is simpler."

Scribe was exactly what his name claimed he was. It was only that he wrote for more than a school: he was also a keeper of contracts. Clients, nameless, reached out through his place at the front of the school to inquire as to the death of others. They would then be given a price, which they would have to pay up front if they wanted to buy the death. In exchange, even if the first attempt ended in failure the contract would remain ongoing until the bought death was delivered.

"You could destroy them," Eudokia said. "Give everything you have to the Secretariat."

"It would not be enough," Scribe said. "There is little proof. When the askretis will send investigators, the School will just sacrifice a few expendables to make it seem as if the matter is at an end. It has been attempted before, girl."

So Graven learned her lessons. And yet she could not forget the night she had woken up in a grave. Or the hands around her throat, though after a year passed that itch was scratched. One

night she woke up as the door to her room – barely larger than a cupboard, she was a servant and not a student – opened, and as she groped for a cutting knife she saw a familiar face staring back at her. Cassandra closed to the door, and a moment of silence hung between them. Graven clutched her knife tight, and then the other girl fell to her knees.

“I’m sorry,” she wept, as she had in the cell. “Eudokia, you have to believe me, I never meant to-”

And she babbled and cried, on her knees, until Eudokia pulled her into an embrace. Stroked her hair and soothed her, but her eyes stayed open and without a single tear.

“I should let you kill me,” Cassandra mumbled. “It’d be fair. I don’t deserve to-”

You won’t, Eudokia thought. *You just don’t want to feel guilty*. So Eudokia denied the offer and comforted her until late in the night, Cassandra creeping away shamefaced as she admitted if she remained any longer her absence would be noticed.

“Anything you want,” Cassandra swore. “I know I can’t earn forgiveness, but I’ll do anything you want.”

She left, and Eudokia sat in the dark holding her knife. Anything she wanted, huh. Never before in her life had she been offered such a thing, and it forced her to think about what she might want. Food, a roof over her head. What else? Safety, she decided. And after that her thoughts trailed off. Yet a moment kept retuning to the forefront of her mind, and though it was not a want she found she could not set it aside. That instant where she had opened her eyes to the night sky, laid atop a pile of corpses. And perhaps that was an answer, in a way. So the next day she snuck off to find Cassandra and told the other girl what it was she wanted.

“Teach me,” Eudokia said, “all that they teach you.”

—

“You are,” Scribe said, “playing a game.”

“I have learned shatranj,” Graven replied. “I find it soothing.”

The old man scowled at her. The two of them sat at the entrance of the school, having moved into the sun as it did good for Scribe’s joints come autumn. He liked to be close to the courtyard trees even if there was a large anthill beneath the olive tree, large black ants swarming around the stones. Graven had been learning from him for three years and was slowly leaving childhood to come into girlhood.

"That brown robe girl," Scribe said. "She's the one who threshed you."

"I have forgiven her," Eudokia lied.

The old man grinned, revealing broken yellow teeth.

"It's not something you forgive," Scribe told her. "I would know."

She had seen her teacher leaving the bath, once, and on his chest there was a small scar that had yet to fade. About a knife's width, just above his heart. In some ways she envied that. There was no trace left of the bruises around her throat, no proof it had been anything but a dream in the dark.

"I have a curious nature," Graven shrugged.

He clicked his tongue.

"You're using her to learn Scholar lessons," Scribe said. "Why?"

"Is it not the trade of this school?" Graven replied.

He hummed, looking unconvinced, but did not pursue the matter further. She did.

"I'm told Crone's lessons are never blade or poison," Graven said. "That they are... philosophy, almost."

"That we are sinless," the old man scoffed. "That we are tools."

"You don't believe it?" she asked.

"When the little scholars reach sixteen," Scribe told her, "they are given another test before they can begin taking contracts."

The wind stirred the trees in the courtyard, cooling the warmth of the lazy afternoon.

"They must take a life," the old man said, "with as unusual a tool as they can. Be it a goblet or kicking horse or even a silken nightgown. Most of the Scholars see it as a test of inventiveness, to see if they can use means other than blade or poison, but Crone seeks to teach them a different lesson."

His jaw clenched.

"That everything under the sun is a tool to deliver death," Scribe said. "That to take a life cannot be a sin any more than a river flowing can be a sin. There can be no good or evil in following the currents of Creation."

Graven stayed silent even as he looked away, up into the sunny blue sky.

"I had a cough, you see," Scribe finally said. "So I might have died anyway. By embracing those teachings, she gets to think of it as embracing the inevitable when she slid the knife in me."

He smiled.

"Even if she is my sister."

Graven stayed silent, listening to the wind in the leaves as her teacher remained lost in memories long past. *Everything under the sun is a tool to deliver death*, she mused. The words, they echoed to her of something like the truth. But Creation was not a river, not a current flowing one way, it was not so simple. How many smaller, hidden decisions had it taken for Cassandra to decide to kill her? Dozens, hundreds, perhaps even thousands if one went back far enough. Creation was not a river, it was... her eyes fell to the anthill beneath the tree. All those hundreds of insects moving around, going about their purpose never knowing that there was a larger world around them. That someone's whim could be their salvation or their demise without them ever realizing it.

Eudokia smiled, because at last she knew what she wanted to do. And today she was thirteen, so she had only three years left.

—

Graven took to visiting the anthill every day.

She brought the ants dollops of honey or spoiled fruit, watching them swarm over it as the months passed and she considered how it might be done. The School of the Gull was not so different from the swarm of insects, when closely observed, and Graven had been watching them for years now. Patiently, silently enough most hardly even remembered she was there. And like the ants following their favourite paths, looking for food to scavenge and enemies to fight, the assassins had routines of their own. Graven knew them line no one else in this school save her teacher could, for she knew what contracts came and who took them. She knew who went out and when, where the coin came from and where it went.

It all came across her ledger, in the same words and numbers that the School of the Gull had taught her years ago. So Graven went looking for her tools.

Scholar Myron was a test, for was this school not fond of them? It was a simple enough matter, to ensure that he got the contracts for killing in the merchant quarters. The man was rash and unpleasant so he was often given night watch – and since Scholars were given right to peruse contracts that arrived under their watch, all Graven had to do was delay receiving the

contract until night watch came. That Myron would take the contract was certain, for merchant killings paid well. Only Myron had been from such a family once, before it knew ruin and he was taken by the school, so whenever he went back there he drank and gambled to cope with the unease. He was not a skilled gambler, even when he did not drink.

It took three months for him to be in such deep debt that he tried to steal from the school, at which point he was caught. He was, after all, rash and disliked. Myron disappeared one night, never to return, and so Graven had killed a man without so much as touching a knife. And yet the truer test had not been for Myron, it had been for another. Scribe had seen it all. He was old now and his joints ached so Graven was given more and more of the work, but he had still ever step of the murder Graven had committed. The old man could have, at any moment, put an end to it.

He had not.

Instead Scribe sat with her in the courtyard as autumn turned to winter and told her stories. Rambling, one might think, about nonsense and old glories. Only those stories were always about Scholars, but their lives and things they had done and things they wanted. About who held power in the School of the Gull and who they had taken it *from*. Friends and enemies and lovers. And the two of them, Scribe and Graven, sat in the grave they'd survived as they watched the small ants and talked of the large ones moving around them. In the warmth of the winter sun, she found herself smiling.

"Do you like my stories so, girl?" Scribe teased.

"I like," Eudokia honestly said, "that we share something."

Scribe chuckled and tossed a slice of orange skin atop the anthill. The insects swarmed it furiously ripping it apart.

—

Nine months before she was sixteen by the reckoning of the School of the Gull, Scribe died.

It was not surprising or unexpected. He had been bedridden for a week, and sickly before. He could barely walk some days, until the day came where he could not. Graven went to him, on that last morning, for she had been sent for. On her way there she found Crone leaving the room, face unreadable, and the old woman brushed past her without a word. Graven entered, nose wrinkling at the smell of death. Scribe did not notice, for he could barely see now, but he recognized it was her.

"Girl," he breathed out.

Graven did not answer, simply sitting by his bedside. He reached out with his hand and tangled his fingers in hers, clutching them tight.

"She wanted," Scribe breathlessly said, "for me to speak her words. To absolve her."

"Did you?" she asked.

The old man laughed.

"I did," he said. "I told her-"

He broke into a cough, starting again when it passed.

"- that you taught me to embrace it," Scribe said.

Graven stilled, unsure what to say.

"My last gift," the old man wheezed. "She won't see you, now. Her eyes will only see what she wants to see."

She breathed out in shock.

"Finish it, girl," Scribe whispered. "Gods, finish it. Close our grave."

He lasted only a few heartbeats more. In the thick silence of the room, Eudokia closed her eyes and wept. When she opened them, Graven began her work.

—

The School of the Gull died because of three sacks of flour gone bad.

It began there, at least. As the graduation of the children she had arrived with approached and with it their last test, so did Eudokia begin her own. As Crone wanted of the other orphans that had ridden the wagons, she would take a life with as unusual a tool as she could.

The sacks of flour themselves were not of particular importance, except in that they had gone bad. This should not have been possible, for they were freshly bought so that the bread baked would be of good quality when served to the paying students in blue robes that believed the place a simple school. The kitchen was immediately suspected of a common enough trick, which was selling back the fresh flour and buying older one at cost while pocketing the difference. The cooks had not, as it happened. Graven had simply poured some water at the bottom of the bags so they would be humid and go bad. Yet when Scholars were tasked to look into the matter by Crone, another of the elders gainsaid her.

It was only flour, Elder Lack said. No need for a Proceran inquisition.

It was so blatantly suspicious that a third elder, Silk, ordered a covert investigation, which unearthed what the second had tried to hide: there was corruption in the kitchen, simply of a different kind. Lack had placed a dozen of his kinsmen among the staff under fake names, which a deeper look into the families revealed, and they'd ensured that it was their family shops that many of the goods were bought from. That would have been scandal enough, until it was noticed that one of these kinsmen handled some of the private meals for the elders and hadn't one of them died of bad shellfish a few years back? Perhaps that was not a coincidence after all. And suddenly it was a little more than a scandal.

Lack, his life now on the line, tried to drag in as many allies as he could. There were only nine elders in the School of the Gull, but now half of them were at each other's throats and through Crone tried to calm the waters she ran into an obstacle. With the kitchens disrupted it had been necessary to hire new staff while those implicated were arrested, and before the matter was ended it had been judged prudent to buy the food from outside the school. Only when Crone had gone about this, she had found fewer funds in the treasury than she should. Some of the school's cuts from contracts paid had been entered on parchment but not in truth.

Records were sought and Graven furnished them without argument, knowing exactly what three Scholars they would point to. They had done no such thing, of course. It had taken Eudokia two years to accomplish the deception: one gold coin a night, all hidden in the same place. All matched to a set of specific contracts that would jump out to an attentive eye when the ledgers were looked at. All three Scholars were loose allies of Elder Silk, which fanned the flames to new heights as Crone was accused of trying to cover for Lack. Perhaps they had been in bed all along, trying to cover it up.

That was when the killings began.

Crone's teachings had been deeply embraced by some of the Scholars, after all. And Graven had ensured they would be out on contracts when this all began, to come back just as the School of the Gull seemed to betray all the teachings they loved and Crone was unfairly accused. They reacted as they were taught to: by taking lives. There were three drownings and a swiftly fatal 'sickness' that followed a meal within a day of them having returned. And once the knives were out, all restraint evaporated. Murder came nightly, the blue robes were sent home for a week under pretext and of the nine elders there now remained six.

One of them, by the name of Shore, was to be the death knell of the school. She was the youngest of the elders and the most ambitious, she and her allies aiming only for the most lucrative of contracts and openly disdaining Crone's teachings. Graven had taken particular pains to ensure she would not be implicated in any of the troubles, knowing what would follow: Shore attempted to take control of the School of the Gull. By diplomacy at first, presenting herself as the foremost untouched by scandal, but when that did not work she resorted to violence in the night. It might even have worked, had Graven not warned Crone the night before it happened.

It was still a close-fought thing. Many had gone Shore's way, including several of the Scholar mages, and the stones of the school ran red with blood. Crone only won by dragging in the students yet to graduate, which tipped the balance even as they died in droves. In the end, when dawn rose over the beleaguered school, only two elders remained: Crone and Dour. Graven had known Dour as Scholar Linos once, the cheerful fat man who had watched as children murdered each other in his examination room. He'd only grown fatter since. The School of the Gull was already a shadow of itself, two thirds of its Scholars dead and half of the students either slain or crippled.

Excuses would have to be made for that before the school opened again but Graven was sent for because of another reason entirely. During the months where it all happened, the Scholars had almost entirely ceased taking contracts. Several were still ongoing, unfinished, and with the rising costs of repairs and bribes to cover all this up the treasury was nearly empty. Graven was not allowed to sit before the two elders, only to stand and present her ledgers when ordered to. Neither of the elders liked what they saw. Crone was the one to address her as more than breathing furniture.

"Come summer there is usually a rash of easy contracts related to affairs," Crone said. "Across the years you have seen, how much would you say the sums they represent amount to?"

Graven dutifully quoted it, prompting the other two to grimace. They now realized they must cut costs if they were to avoid bankruptcy before the blue robe students could return and serve as steady income again.

"We rid ourselves of some expense and rush graduation," Dour said. "It's the only way."

"We have gained expenses, not lost them," Crone said, sounding irritated. "What would you even suggest we cut?"

Graven, remembered the lessons on movement that Cassandra had taught her, moved just enough to draw the eye. Her face was

already schooled into an expression of hesitation. Dour picked up on it, leaning forward.

"You have something to suggest, Graven?" he said.

She mutely nodded, waiting for his invitation to speak.

"Communal meals, until the paying students return," Eudokia shyly said. "The students can cook together for everyone."

And, without even needing to look, she knew she had Dour. It would appeal to him, the simplicity of getting rid of all the kitchen staff. All the troubles had begun with corruption there, it was not only getting rid of salaries but also a way of cleaning house. It also put students to work, which would lessen the load on the few Scholars left: with fewer needed teaching, more could take contracts. But Crone's eyes watched Graven, unblinking, and for a moment she thought she'd been seen through. That the old killer had glimpsed the hatred under the mask. But she couldn't, could she? Oh, it would cost her too much to see it. So in the end Crone only nodded and smiled, praising Graven for the notion.

For if Graven was a traitor, then her brother had died despising her to the last breath.

—

Graven had never taken a single class on the subject of poison, so how could she be suspected? Why would anyone at all be suspected, when at last all their troubles were over?

It was madness, besides, to poison a cauldron soup ever single member of the School of the Gull would eat from. Unless you had the antidote at hand. Graven had been careful, still. She'd made sure there were enough onions in the broth to cover the taste of the *douce morte* and that it would be taken at supper. No one died because it was a slow poison, instead heading back to their dormitories and rooms as night fell. Graven drank her antidote and rid herself of the vial, then headed out to the courtyard under moonlight and sat by the anthill. She'd not been in weeks, so when she dropped the orange peel the ants swarmed it eagerly.

And they ate, ate, ate it up even though it had been dipped in poison. It was their habit, and they were so very hungry.

As Graven sat in the dark, the last of the School of the Gull died. The *douce morte* was a gentle way to go, more than they deserved. After a few hours paralysis would set in and they would fall asleep, never to wake. All except for one. She rose to her feet, passing the rooms of the dying, until she found Cassandra. Paralysis had already set in so she had to force open the other girl's mouth and pour the antidote in before massaging the throat

so she'd swallow. Not a full dose of antidote, though. Just enough to delay the death and undo some of the paralysis, not save her life. Cassandra woke as Graven helped her on her feet, taking her outside. She was only able to speak when they reached one of the gardens, seemingly confused.

"Eudokia," she croaked. "What's happening?"

"I want," Graven said, "to show you something."

She set the other girl down against a tree and took a few steps forward, finding the shovel she had left there. And she began to dig under the grass and the flowers, shovelful by shovelful, until the moon shone down on pale bone and Cassandra let out a gasp.

"It's where they buried us," Graven quietly told her. "It's where I woke up, once upon a time, looking at the sky."

She kept digging, moving the bones aside, until the pale light revealed something else entirely. Gold. Every piece of it she had stolen from the treasury, buried in a place even the most cold-hearted of the Scholars avoided like the plague. Cassandra saw it too.

"You," she got out. "It was *you*."

"It was," Graven admitted, setting her shovel aside and rising from the hole.

"Why?" Cassandra moaned. "Why do it?"

"Because I am the last graduate of the School of the Gull," Eudokia smiled. "Behold my last test: I have slain the school, wielding its own hands."

She grabbed Cassandra by the collar, feeling her breath grow panicky.

"And now I finish the work," Eudokia said, throwing her into the grave.

She filled it back up over Cassandra, shovelful by shovelful, as the other girl screamed so much her voice broke. When it was done, Eudokia stood over the grave and closed her eyes, breathing out. She'd thought she would feel something, at the end. Pleasure, joy, even simple satisfaction. Only all she found, when she looked inside herself, was a vague sense of relief.

Like she'd finished evening out a ledger.

She picked up her things, robbing what was left of the treasury on her way out, and overfed the kitchen fire after tearing down the grid. It would all catch fire soon enough, erasing the last

traces of the School of the Gull. There were still Scholars out there, some branches out in other places, but the school was done. It was dead and bankrupt. Eudokia, walking out through the courtyard, stopped by the desk at the front. There she opened the ledger and slid a single piece of parchment, one with an address written in it.

Then she walked away and never looked back.

—

It took a fortnight before the first one came to the little house she had bought on the outskirts of Delos, at the address she had written. The man looked hesitant even as she welcomed him in, invited him to sit and served tea. And though he danced around the subject, he had come for exactly the same reason men had once come to the School of the Gull: to buy a death.

It would not be the same as before, Eudokia thought. It would be her hand that chose the tools that would do the killing for her. She would make killers of her own, bind them to her with ink and learning. And always she would remain out of sight as the work continued, merely the woman holding the ledger than no one looked at twice. It did not feel right, not exactly, but something close to it.

Like clothes tailored for her.

"And what should I call you?" the man asked, looking nervous.

A name, she mused. She must bear one again and no longer would she use Graven. She had, at last, left behind the grave they had ripped her from. So what should she use? Eudokia thought, then, of startlingly blue eyes. Of the rough kindness of the man who had taught her, of the long vengeance they had shared. Then she smiled, for the answer was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Scribe," she said. "You may call me Scribe."