

Book 6

Prologue

"And so Dread Emperor Heinous thus addressed his court: 'Are we not rulers of devils and dead, princes among usurpers? Why then should we suffer another to call himself king of our demesne?' All agreed in this, and so war was declared upon Keter."

– Extract from the Scroll of Vainglory, thirty-ninth of the Secret Histories of Praes (destroyed by order of Dread Empress Maleficent II, only partial texts remain)

They'd had three months of reprieve, to the day.

Prince Otto Reitzenberg, who his people yet called Redcrown, had prepared for the hour the truce would end without pause or rest. He'd slept as little as he could, and when he did he'd found himself plagued by nightmares. Unable to meet the solemn and silent faces of his sisters, of his father, of the all the Reitzenbergs that'd died keeping dawn from failing for one more night as they stared at him unblinking. All the shades he had come so close to failing. The Morgentor, the last fortress still in the hands of the living in Twilight's Pass, had been mere weeks away from falling when the Black Queen had tricked a truce out of the Enemy. Otto Redcrown, last of his line, had done all he could to keep the Dead penned up in the pass but the doom of his people had been writ in the stars. Yet for this inadequacy he had somehow been rewarded with three more months to prepare, and knowing the end was coming the Prince of Bremen had worked himself *raw*.

Frederic at his side, they'd squeezed the full worth out of every heartbeat. Soldiers allowed to rest, yes, but some put to work other than war. Supply lines were opened anew and refurbished, wagons filled with the necessities of war. First Prince Cordelia herself secured gold and foodstuffs and steel, striking deals with half the continent to secure supplies and reinforcements. She had not forgot, Otto had been moved to see. Rhenia's favourite daughter had not come home when Keter marched, but never once had she forgot her kin. She'd stayed south to make sure the south would come to their aid, that famously unbending Hasenbach backbone lent to all Procer. Just as importantly, the young and the old of Lycaonese lands had been sent south to safety under the protection of Frederic's cousin and heiress in Lyonis when the dead ceased their raiding into the lowlands. The future of his people was now safeguarded under the kin of his friend. Then a hard choice had been posed to Otto, as was so often the way in these times.

Should he send all soldiers save those holding the Morgentor into northern Lyonis, to ready the fight there for when Twilight's Pass fell and the Lycaonese lowlands followed, or should every sword in the land be brought to Morning's Gate to spit one last defiance in the Enemy's eye? It had burned him to even consider it, but he must see to the future of his people beyond the cast of pride. Yet he'd been a fool, Otto realized the first time a warband of haggard souls bearing ill-fitting mail and hard eyes marched into the sprawling camp at the bottom of the Morgentor. They had come. Alone and in pairs, in bands of twenty or a hundred. Through wind and snow and treacherous mountain paths. Farmers and miners and shepherds, innkeepers and drapers, scribes and carpenters and a hundred other things. Yet Lycaonese all, so they came wearing the steel handed down families since the days of the Iron Kings and there would be no talk of *retreat*.

Twilight's Pass was the last lock on the door that might keep the Dead King from devouring the world, and so it would hold until there were none left to hold it. Their numbers had swelled with every band of volunteers, to almost one hundred thousand, and though the Enemy's might was without question, the Morgentor was no less mighty a fortress. It would hold, Otto Redcrown had sworn. It would hold whatever might come. They had prepared, sharpened their steel, and they stood atop perhaps the second finest fortifications in all Calernia – only the cliff-city of Rhenia or Keter itself might claim to surpass Morning's Gate, now that Hannover had fallen. Odds were never good, against the Dead King, but this was perhaps the finest they'd been in Otto's lifetime.

Then of the three tower-fortresses of the Morgentor, the Three Peaks, they lost two on the first day.

If Frederic had not come into his Choosing they might have lost the third tower as well, the central one, and that would have been a disaster there'd be no recovering from. The Kingfisher Prince had held a buckling line by sheer dint of *refusing to die* and reclaimed the top of the walls from the Enemy long enough to set everything aflame with pitch. It'd cut off the dead within the fallen towers from steady reinforcements long enough to take them back as well, though it'd meant twelve hours of bloody uphill fighting. Otto Redcrown had scraped together an army of one hundred thousand, his people assembled from every corner of Lycaonese lands, and on the first day of the Dead's resumed offensive he had lost near twenty thousand of them. The Reitzenberg would have wept at that, if there were any tears in him left to shed, but there were none. All there was left was duty, and so he let duty devour him whole.

The Dead came and Otto Redcrown met them with steel and fire unrelenting. When half an army of ghouls crawled up icy walls like they were treading open road, massive iron scythes were

freed to swing through the lot of them. When flocks of winged abominations dropped down like a flood of locusts, they were dragged down with nets and kept there for the mages to scour in flame. Plague-seeding rats, clouds of poison, even a rain of fire: every night the Enemy tried a fresh devilry and the last of the Reitzenberg grit his teeth before standing his ground. The days belonged to Frederic but the nights were his, though as the siege continued time became meaningless. There was only the sea of death lapping at the walls, the relentless assaults through every hour of every day. And though the cracks were spreading through the army, the fault lines of terror and sleeplessness and a fight that could not truly be won, still every dusk and dawn soldiers climbed up the stairs to fight for the ramparts of the Morgentor.

It was an honourable way to die, the Prince of Bremen had decided. If the days of the Lycaonese were fated to end, Otto thought, let them end with the last of them standing straight-backed in the Enemy's way. He'd been sleeping for barely three hours when he was brought out of a forming nightmare, shaken awake in his cot at the bottom of the Herzhaupt, and though bone-tired and bleary-eyed the Prince of Bremen rose without protest. The captain that had come for him, one of Frederic's men, awaited outside and bowed low when Otto emerged with his armour already being strapped tight.

"Which peak is falling?" Otto Redcrown bluntly asked.

There were not many reasons why he'd be woken now, and so soon after going to rest besides.

"Begging your pardon, Your Grace, but it is quite the opposite," the captain replied, bowing again. "We have reinforcements."

The dark-haired prince blinked in surprise. It could not have been another warband of his people drifting in: it still happened every few days, though the gap was spreading as time passed, and was not so unusual as to require him being awoken.

"Who?" he asked, then added, "and where's Prince Frederic?"

"Awaiting you at the Prinztopf so that you might greet them together, Your Grace," the captain replied. "And the simple answer would be that they are... from the Grand Alliance."

Clapping the man on the back, Otto wasted no more time on quibbling. He trusted Frederic Goethal not to have ordered him roused without good reason, though it had taken some convincing before the Alamans prince was sold on 'obtaining a rare bottle of wine and wanting to share it' not being one of these. An escort of sworn swords followed him without a word as he headed towards the massive camp raised in the shadow of the Three Peaks, as they did everywhere since a Revenant had been sent to claim his head

as he slept. Frederic was not difficult to find, as the man surrounded by the usual swarm of courtiers. Otto could not muster even a speck of contempt for these, however, for though their silks and *bon mots* were trying they belonged to men and women he'd once seen savagely fight their way through two beorns and a crippled Revenant merely to snatch the banner carried by the latter. It'd emerged three days later as a dishwashing rag in the Ostenhaupt kitchens, for the Alamans were making a game of finding the most insulting use possible for the Dead King's banners.

They were mad one and all, which was undoubtedly why the rest of the host had grown so fond of them.

"Otto, my friend!" Prince Frederic Goethal of Brus greeted them. "It has been too long since we shared daylight."

The clasped arms, though Frederic's insistence on cheek-kissing as they did remained just as unsettling as it'd been the first time the Prince of Bremen was subjected to it.

"Your man was vague when I asked who's come," Otto said.

"I can understand why," the Prince of Brus replied, sounding amused. "None of the etiquette we've been taught applies here."

They left the large iron-reinforced tent soldiers called the Prinztopf – the prince pot, it meant, for it was where they held councils in camp and the odd shape of the tent was evocative – behind them and Otto allowed himself to be led, enjoying the warmth of the spring sun on his skin. When they found their guests, the reason why the Alamans were at such loss was made evident. Of the five people in the tent they'd entered, only three were human and only one was Proceran. The gold and white robes of the Holies were not unknown ever this far north.

"His Grace, Prince Otto Reitzenberg of Bremen, styled the Redcrown," Frederic introduced him in Chantant.

"Prince Frederic of Brus," Otto said, returning the favour in the same. "Chosen. The Kingfisher Prince. We share command here."

"I am-" the priest began, but was immediately interrupted.

"One of the idiots who figured overthrowing Hasenbach was a good idea," the old woman with painted face said. "You've been sent here to die by Keter instead of noose, Proceran, no one cares about your name. I am Lady Itima Ifriqui of Vaccei. My Blood is that of the Vengeful Brigand and I bring ten thousand warriors. I am told your people have been struggling with raids on your supply lines, coming down from Hocheben Heights."

She grinned, and it was not a pleasant sight.

"I have come to lend my expertise in such matters, Procerans," Lady Itima said.

The stunning redhead in good armour that was standing by the pair of goblins looked faintly amused but passed no comment before introducing herself.

"Special Tribune Kilian of the Green Stretch, Army of Callow," she said, her Chantant strangely accented. "By the order of my queen I bring twenty mage lines, including some of our foremost warding and scrying specialists. I've been tasked with ensuring the Morgentor is both warded up to Callowan standard and brought into the Grand Alliance scrying relay system."

She was in the Black Queen's service? He would not have guessed at a look.

"We are most thankful for your assistance," Prince Frederic said. "Though it appears introductions are not yet complete?"

One of the goblins, Otto saw, was scribbling with a charcoal pen on parchment. The other one spoke for it, voice narrowly revealing it was male even though it was the smaller of the two.

"Special Tribune Robber," the goblin introduced himself, malevolently grinning. "I'm told you folk could benefit from a little sabotage of the opposition. As it happens, I'm not unfamiliar with-

"Sapper-General Pickler," the other goblin interrupted, revealing herself female. "I'm told some cretin talked you lot in using dwarven engines for the defence of your fortresses."

"We make some defences of our own," Prince Otto replied, unmoved by the rudeness. "Though few proper engines."

"Good, that'll make useful hands to borrow," Sapper-General Pickler said, sounding approving. "I've been tasked with raising your siege capacity to something that wouldn't make a goblin simpleton weep as well as crafting apparatuses specifically to deal with the creatures you've named 'wyrms' and 'beorns'."

Frederic looked uncomfortable, though he was too polite to grimace. His people, especially the highborn, were taught that even subtly referring to coin in conversation was quite crude.

"Even with our current loans, we don't have the coin to afford this," Otto frankly told the goblin general.

"Congratulations," the goblin replied, "as per arrangements struck with the First Prince of Procer, you've been granted conditional loans by the crown of Callow over this matter."

The Prince of Bremen blinked.

"And what conditions would these be?" he asked.

"*Is this going to be useful?*" Sapper-General Pickler grinned, revealing rows and rows of needle-like teeth.

Otto Redcrown, last of the House of Reitzenberg, grinned back. Oh, this would do. This would do nicely indeed.

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Rozala would never grow to like Gaspard Langevin, she mused as she watched the growing shape of the man's capital in the distance.

The Prince of Cleves was prickly, of resentful temper yet swift to offer insult himself, and seemingly convinced that the ancient beginnings of his line meant that he belonged to a sort of nobility within nobility. The Princess of Aequitan knew well her histories and had even, as a youth, snuck in a reading of Princess Eliza Alaguer's ever contentious *The Labyrinth Empire* so she'd been darkly amused to learn of this. After all, most of the ancient Alamans tribes would have been appalled at the very notion of nobility: tribes elected their chieftains, whose authority was even then shared with the tribe's high priest or priestess of the Hallowed. It was her own Arlesite forbears who'd brought princely rule to the Principate, as before the founding of Procer the greatest of the fortress-holding *reales* had already come to exact oaths of fealty from their lesser kindred – and so arguably become the first princes and princesses as the word was understood in modern parlance.

Yet these days it was the Alamans that orated of ancient blood, while Arlesites had been taught the virtues of bringing in the fresh sort onto thrones by the constant warfare on the southern and eastern borders. Rozala's own line, the Malanzas, had not always been royalty. It'd been great victories in Levant and a ruthless streak at home that saw them rise to bear a crown when the previous ruling line of Aequitan grew weak. That 'lowly' origin was no secret, and so part of the reason that as far as the Prince of Cleves was concerned Rozala Malanza was still more a general than princess. It was no surprise that during the Great War his principality had supported the bid of Princess Constance of Aisne instead of Rozala's own mother. Still, for all the disdain they shared for each other – only sharpened by Prince Gaspard's personal and political antipathy to the faction Prince Amadis had formed in the Highest Assembly, of which Rozala had openly been part before rising to command it – they were well-bred enough to remain cordial.

To his honour, Prince Gaspard had never once been sparing nor stingy in supporting the armies that had come to fight in the defence of Cleves. Though the man rarely took the field himself, he'd charged his eldest son and heir with command of his army as

well as bought the service of every fantassin company north of Cantal not already under contract. Between this and the supplies being brought into Cleves the prince had gone deeply into debt, though he was keeping up appearances with admirable Alamans aplomb. He should be able to dig himself out of the pit, after the war. Cordelia Hasenbach had wrought some sort of financial wizardry that'd greatly lessen the debt burdens incurred defending Procer. Something about bundling together the debts of many principalities and slicing that mixed greater debt apart before selling the slices to the Merchant Lords and banks of Mercantis, and promised yet more aid to come. Her mind was drifting once again, the Princess of Aequitan realized.

Perhaps it was only to be expected. The Twilight Ways invited deep reflections, she felt, the eternal starry night sky somehow giving an impression of solitude even when one was surrounded by thousands. Even two days out of those eldritch paths Rozala's mood and that of the forces under her command remained rather restrained. For some, like the princess herself, the disposition had lingered at the thought that after witnessing fresh horrors south they were now returning to the familiar ones of Cleves. The dark-haired princess had not been able to sleep on a cot since leaving the Ways, unwilling to let herself be unconscious without being *certain* that digging beneath would wake her. For others, though, it would be the first fresh taste of what war against the Dead King looked like. Rozala was pleased to have gotten Lord Yannu Marave when the Levantines armies were split between fronts, and not only for the heavy infantry the Lord of Alava brought with him: his cool, calculating manner would serve him well when the terror began. The other allies she was bringing to Cleves were harder to read, not that the Princess of Aequitan was all that inclined to try: sometimes she was almost as wary of them as the Dead.

Forcing herself to attend to the present instead of sinking into her thoughts again – anything to avoid remembering the sound of digging, *digging* beneath her feet, which she sometimes still heard even though she was hearing nothing of the sort – the Princess of Aequitan spurred on her horse forward and her mounted escorts followed. Clevans called the sparsely paved road beneath the hooves of her horse *la route aux chandelles*, the candle road, because of the stone markers on the side of it: each had been set down at the length it would take for a candle to melt from the last marker, allowing travellers and merchants to gauge how long they had left before reaching the capital. It linked the city to the southern walled town of Jurivan, itself a destination for roads coming out of Brabant and Lyonis, and so was rightfully seen as the trade artery of the principality. It was also the largest road in Cleves, made so that three wagons at once could use it, one of the reasons Rozala had chosen it for the path of her armies.

The last stretch of the candle road was nearly flat ground until the foot of the capital itself was reached, if flanked by a low plateau to the east, and so the Princess of Aquitan was not surprised when ahead she saw tall banners and a company of riders heading towards her. Prince Gaspard had been warned of her coming by scrying ritual, and by the looks of the tallest banner had come out to greet her himself. The pale unicorn on azure, crowned by a six-petalled flower – one petal for every crusade in which a ruling Langevin had personally fought – was the Prince of Cleves' personal banner, which meant he was of the approaching company. Reining in her horse, the dark-haired Arlesite slowed until she could easily turn back. It would be impolitic of her to meet with the Prince of Cleves without bringing along the other two generals of this grand coalition of theirs. Lord Yannu was not difficult to find, for the Levantine lord was himself riding out to meet her, and so was the natural beginning.

"Princess Rozala," the Lord of Alava greeted her, reining in his horse.

"Lord Yannu," the Princess of Aquitan replied with a nod. "Our host rides out to meet us."

"Armies have a way of commanding courtesy," the large man bluntly said.

It was true enough, though rather uncouth to voice it.

"My outriders on the left flank have lost sight of our friends," Rozala admitted. "I don't suppose yours had sharper eyes?"

"Somewhere in the hills to the west is the most I can give you," Yannu Marave said. "They've proved arduous to follow."

Then the two of them would proceed without their third peer, the dark-haired woman decided. Lapses in etiquette were unlikely to matter much to that lot regardless. The two aristocrats waited for their honour guards to gather before riding out together, going down the road at a brisk trot. They were met by the sound of drums and flutes playing the stirring tune of the Roving Minstrel's famous *Marching on Keter*, the banner of the Langevins of Cleves flying high with those of the lesser highborn beneath. Prince Gaspard himself brought his horse out ahead and took the initiative to greet them.

"Your Grace," Gaspard Langevin said, meeting Rozala's eyes and bowing. "It is a pleasure to see you returned to Cleves."

"Our work here is not yet finished," Rozala Malanza said. "I look forward to keeping your council once more, Your Grace."

And even though she held no love for the man that courtesy had not been entirely untrue. For all his pettier traits, Gaspard

Langevin was an able man. Rozala would rather take council from a man she disliked but respected than the opposite.

"It has been one hundred and twelve years since one of the Champion's Blood has last honoured Cleves by being a guest, Lord Marave," Prince Gaspard continued. "I am pleased to end this unfortunate course today."

"The Dominion honours its oaths," Lord Yannu replied in his very good Chantant. "War on Keter, war to the knife."

The Prince of Cleves inclined his head in further thanks, not having been given much to work with. Rozala was dimly amused, for once she had also found it necessary to adapt to the bluntness of the Levantines in such matters.

"I was given to understand," the Prince of Cleves delicately continued, "that there would be a third."

"It is so," Princess Rozala agreed. "Though General Rumena-"

"Can speak for itself."

Rumena the Tomb-Maker – and oh, that even the Black Queen named it this has been enough to make Rozala very wary – was the sole visibly old drow the dark-eyed princess had ever seen. Though tall it had grown stooped and its skin deeply creased, disdaining weapons and attired in a long belted tunic of obsidian rings not unlike chain mail. Its long hair was pure white and its eyes a shade of silver that seemed almost blue in some lights. At the Graveyard, that drow had scored a draw against the Regicide without even using a blade. Now none of the startled riders, many of which now reached for their blades, had even noticed it approaching. It was as if it had been spat out by the rocks, without warning.

"You have corpses wandering your lands, Unicorn Prince," General Rumena continued, its Chantant eerily good.

Given how the drow were rumoured to learn such things, the fact that the old monster had a distinct Bayeux accent was distressing.

"Well met, General Rumena of the Empire Ever Dark," Prince Gaspard said with what she deemed to be remarkable poise. "You speak truly. Keter has found unseen paths from the coast and warbands now wander the land."

"Rest easy, Unicorn Prince," General Rumena grinned. "Now so do we."

Lord Yannu let out a bark of appreciative laughter. Princess Rozala Malanza met the eyes of the ruler of Cleves when he

hesitantly turned to her and inclined her head. *Monsters, Gaspard, make no mistake, she tried to silently convey. They are monsters. And Gods forgive us all, but Keter will rue the day they lent their fangs to the cause of our survival.*

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Prince Klaus Papenheim spat into the melting snow, abandoning the reins of his mount to wipe the wetness from his lips after. Ratbiter was placid horse for a Bremen *stampfen*, to his old rider at least, and so he'd not taken to misbehaving even after the arm Klaus lost in the fall of Hainaut had made him a clumsier horseman. Leaning against his stirrups to remain straight-backed, the Prince of Hannover – prince of ruins, ghosts and exiles these days – unclasped his helmet and ripped it off before wedging it into the crook of his arm. Sweats-soaked hair slipped down onto his brow and the old man let out an exhausted breath before mastering himself.

The day was coming to an end, but that would bring no relief: in the darkness his soldiers would slow and stumble, exhausted and blind. The dead would not share those weaknesses, and relentlessly pursue so that dawn would find half his host had been slaughtered whimpering in the dark. It was a favoured tactic of the Enemy, the reason his ancestors had taken to raising walls and fortresses instead of meeting the Dead on the field. Unlike the ratlings, who were best met and broken on prepared killing grounds before they could cross the rivers and slip into the Hannover lowlands, the Dead King's legions were always risky to confront in open battle.

All it took was for the living to lose once and the Enemy would turn setback into disaster before hounding even that all the way to annihilation. One of his own guard rode to his side, as exhausted as he but hiding it better for her lesser burden of years.

"My prince," Captain Karolina Leisberg said, "I would ask for your permission to reinforce the rearguard."

Dirty blonde hair peeked under the rim of her helm as the other soldier forced her words to come out steady though she'd just volunteered for a duty that was likely to see her and everyone she brought with her dead before night fell. Klaus spat again into the snow, though the taste of blood and grime could not seem to leave the roof of his mouth.

"No," the Iron Prince replied. "I'm not throwing horse into that hungry maw, captain. It'd be raised and sent back to hound us after dark: I'll not hand Old Bones riders to bleed us."

One of the few saving graces of fighting the Dead was the thrift of horsemen, not that Keter had not tried to make up that lack by

killing and raising any cavalry it could get its hands on. Klaus Papenheim had no intention of tossing a good company of four hundred Lycaonese horse into the embrace of the Enemy, even to save twice that in foot. Not when the cost in foot ridden down afterwards might easily dwarf what had been saved, for none had known true pursuit until they'd been chased by riders whose horses did not *tire*. Not that the retreat from the Hainaut lowlands hadn't been bound to be a messy affair regardless, as abandoning the defences of the southern castles of the principality for the sloping plains leading into Brabant had been as good as a written invitation for Keter to strike at them.

There'd been no choice, though, Klaus and Princess Beatrice had agreed. They were losing too many soldiers trying to keep the lines of defence standing, it was only a matter of time until Keter ground them to dust by attrition. They'd been in talks with Prince Étienne of Brabant for near three months now, arranging the line of hastily-raised defences where they would retreat to, but it looked like the losses in getting there might be more dire than even the Iron Prince's bleakest predictions. Their plan had been sound, Klaus still believed, and nearly worked: a sudden offensive on the Dead King's western flank, as if they were trying to break away and join the armies in Cleves, had drawn the Enemy's strength away from the fortresses for a time.

The wounded had been evacuated from the southern fortresses first, and then the garrisons under the command of Princess Mathilda, and so the better part of the military strength in Hainaut would be preserved and able to stiffen the defence of northern Brabant. But the distraction force that Klaus and Princess Beatrice had led west to sell the lie by their very presence had found stiffer resistance than expected: they'd retaken the fortress at Luciennerie easily enough, for the Enemy had torn down the walls taking it, but heading into the hilly highlands afterwards they'd found a force Klaus had once believed to be an old legend: the Grey Legion, led by the silent and implacable Prince of Bones.

No petty skeletons, these, but undead whose ancient bones had been surrounded by a body of wrought iron and steel. Though slow and lumbering, the seven thousand abominations were near unbreakable by force of arms, a crushing steel fist before which all men crumbled. Their long axes entirely made of steel had reaped near two thousand lives before the Prince of Hannover understood who it was they were facing, and by then the Prince of Bones had entered the fray. It was said in Lycaonese legends that the Revenant who held sway over the Grey Legion was an ancient Iron King, slain by the Dead King's own hand and raised anew, but in Hannover the tale was slightly different – it was, Klaus's own father had told him as a child, their ancient ancestor Albrecht Papenheim. The Lord of Last Stands, the Lone Sentinel.

The same man who'd stubbornly held Twilight's Pass with only a bare bones garrison for a year even as an Alamans foray into Bremen was driven out. He'd died, the stories said, standing alone as the last of his army on the same dawn the armies that'd beaten back the southerners began marching north for the Pass. True to his charge 'til the last breath. Whatever the truth of who the Prince of Bones had once been, he'd since been made into an implacable servant of Keter: the Silent Guardian and the Blade of Mercy had both sallied out to meet him in battle and been swept aside almost contemptuously. The Painted Knife had struck it from the back trying to cut through the neck – a practical girl, that one, Klaus rather liked her – and found that below the armour was only a sea of furious sorcery that'd violently lashed out and blown her away. If the Repentant Magister had not been able to trap him within a circle of flames for an hour, the defeat they were inflicted that day might have been an outright rout. Not that their retreat south towards Brabant had been anything but a succession of losses since that first defeat.

Three days, that was the worst of it. Another three days and their host would have made it to the freshly raised fort at Engrenon and been able to dig in to await reinforcements. The way the day was going, though, it was not to be. Not unless hard decisions were made. A short trumpet call told the Iron Prince that the woman he'd been waiting for had arrived, and Princess Beatrice Volignac rode in with her personal guard at a brisk trot. The latest Princess of Hainaut looked rather ludicrous, at first glance: her considerable girth was coated in mail and heavy furs, and from a distance she looked like a bloated waterskin forcefully strapped atop a horse. Younger sister to Princess Julienne, she had the same green eyes and coal-black hair but unlike her late sister's they were set on a narrow, pinched face with too-large lips. Klaus had thought little of her at first, he'd admit as much. For anyone to grow fat as Princess Beatrice was would have been considered a shameful thing back home, thoughtless indulgence and selfishness. To eat so much meant that either another went hungry or granaries were taken from.

He'd been wrong though, even in his lazy assumption that her weight meant she'd be a poor rider. She was a better horsewoman than even her sister had been, and a finer lance as well. More importantly, Beatrice Volignac had a searing fire inside her that made her one of the most driven people the Prince of Hannover had ever met. She hardly slept, and Klaus had found her so proficient a captain of men he'd effectively ceded command of all Alamans forces to her. She had a defter touch with them, and under her command they'd risen to become almost as fierce fighters as his own soldiers.

"Her Grace Beatrice Volignac, Princess of Hainaut," the herald announced.

The woman in question reined in her horse by his side, gesturing for her escort to withdraw. Klaus glanced at his own riders and nodded. Without a word they did the same.

"Prince Klaus," the dark-haired woman said.

"Princess Beatrice," he replied. "I'll be blunt: the rearguard is failing and if we reinforce it we'll lose our entire host."

The Alamans princess grimaced.

"I'd begun to suspect as much," she admitted. "The lesser dead are slowing them down too much, it's only a matter of time until the Grey Legion catches up."

And a pitched battle against that, neither needed to say, was a fool's errand. They'd tried to send for the Witch of the Woods, whose sorceries might be a match for those relentless steel killers, but there was no telling if the riders had made it to a scrying station – or whether she'd arrive in time, even should she be reached.

"We've twenty thousand men to care for," the Prince of Hannover said, knowing it was likely closer to seventeen now. "Those soldiers who hold our back have proved brave and true, and this is poor repayment, but we cannot throw away the other sixteen thousand trying to save that four."

The Princess of Hainaut looked disgusted with herself, but she did not disagree.

"Weeping Heavens," she murmured, "what ugly creatures this war makes of us all."

Klaus's gaze turned to behind them, where the sprawl of their column could be made from atop the hill where they both sat. His own horse had scythed through the packs of ghouls that'd sprung from the snow and earth to ambush the flanks of the column's centre stretch, freeing it to resume its advance, but Keter had still gotten its due: the temporary slowing had been enough to force the rearguard to fully engage the undead skirmishers that'd been pursuing them all day. Though these were little more than skeletons with javelins and swords, wearing not a single piece of armour, the 'naked' skirmishers were damned fast and tireless, and one of the Dead King's favourite manners of tying down foot so that his heavier forces could catch up to them. It would be so here, the first battalions of sword and board corpses bearing old ringmail already beginning to emerge above nearby hilltops. The rearguard's shield wall was spreading out, preparing for the brutal melee heading towards it.

"Someone will have to take command there," Klaus said. "Else they'll break too soon."

There was no contempt in his tone as he spoke, for though the soldiers in the rear were mostly Arlesites his own brethren would behave little differently. Men often found great courage when they knew there was no avoiding death, but when there was still hope for life – as there would be, should those in the back of the shield wall break and run before too many of the dead arrived – it was only natural to find one's feet itching to flee. It was the duty of a good captain to make their soldiers understand why there was a need to stand and fight even when there would be no leaving the field alive.

"Agreed," Princess Beatrice said.

A heartbeat later they both began to speak-

"I'lll-"

A twin look of surprise was shared, and Klaus Papenheim let out a rueful chuckle.

"I'm at the end of my rope, Volignac," he bluntly said. "I'm an old cripple a long way from home, fading out no matter how much the priests fight it. You've still decades in you, and your sister's sons to raise."

"You're the Iron Prince," she flatly replied. "Your reputation is the reason this is a retreat and not a rout. So long as you still breathe our host believes it might survive this march. I'll entrust the safety of my nephews to you and beg you might request of the First Prince that she'll allow them to attend her in Salia."

Before he could dismiss that for the foolishness it was – how trite a trade, to keep alive an old sack of bones like him for a few more years when she might serve the cause for decades yet – when they were interrupted by the sound of swords unsheathing as one. Princess Beatrice's guards and his were all looking at a strange gash in the air. Through the opening Klaus glimpsed a night sky and eerily enough felt warm breeze drift out. What came out with it, though was more familiar a sight.

"Sheathe your swords," the Iron Prince ordered, then inclined his head in greeting. "White Knight. It's been some time."

"Prince Klaus," the Sword of Judgement replied, inclining his head in return.

"Come to join our little stand, have you?" Princess Beatrice said. "You're welcome to a few battalions. Plenty to spare."

"Indeed," the dark-skinned hero agreed. "Though I come bearing request on behalf of another, in truth."

"Indeed?" Klaus drily repeated.

"It is requested that your rearguard pull back by a hundred feet and any spears and pikes you have might be brought to its fore," the White Knight said, impervious to sarcasm.

"And who requests this, pray tell?" Princess Beatrice demanded.

It was a sound like cloth ripping, if it were a cloth so large as to cover half the world. Klaus Papenheim caught sight of the rippling gates and the soldiers that strode out of them. On the left side of the shield wall, painted soldiers bearing hooked swords and shields rushed out. On the other, rows and rows of shining steel marched out in cadence, shields raised and tightly packed. *Legionaries*. Army of Callow, by the banner: stark cloth, bearing the Miezian numerals for three.

"The Black Queen," Klaus Papenheim said, and it was not a question.

Gates kept opening, some as small as a single man while others were making room for engines of war being dragged out by wagon, and soldiers kept pouring out.

"Today it is our turn, Iron Prince, to go on the offensive," the Sword of Judgement smiled.

The Prince of Hannover's remaining hand reached for the pommel of the sword at his hip, clutching it tight. Another gate opened atop a hill to the west and, banners streaming behind them, a company of knights rode out to form a wedge aimed at the Enemy's flank. At their head was a single silhouette in a colourful patchwork cloak, twin great crows perched on her shoulders. A horn sounded: one, twice, thrice. Lances went down and the last knights of Callow began their charge, their warlord queen at the tip of the spear. Klaus Papenheim smiled a wolf's smile, fierce and toothy and so very eager to finally sink his fangs in the Enemy's throat.

"Then let's turn this army around, Princess Beatrice," the Iron Prince said, meeting his comrade's eye. "And remind Ol' Bones this war has yet to find a victor."

Chapter 1: Recommence

"In the conduct of war offence is commonly preferable to defence; for in attacking a general acts according to their own designs, while in defence they act according to the designs of the enemy."
– Extract from the 'Ars Tactica', famed military treatise of Dread Emperor Terribilis the First

The afternoon sun stared down blearily at our backs, banners flapping in the wind as we watched the soldiers on the field below. These were good flat grounds; my men had had time to set up and there were fewer than five hundred undead facing them: this was as close to a safe skirmish as we'd ever get in a war like this one.

I had no intention of wasting such a rare opportunity even if it'd been tragedy that dropped it into my lap. Hakram himself had handpicked the lines that made up the formation of three hundred legionaries, with an eye to ensuring they were greenhorns – as much as the Army of Callow still had any of those – instead of veterans. We wouldn't always have the luxury of well-trained soldiers to draw on, and if the assault companies were to be a success on the northern fields then we'd need to plan for the lowest fare of what we'd be able to field and not the finest. Even after only two months of training, though, my countrymen did me proud. Spears were hammered into the ground at a sharp angle, as if a line of long stakes, and behind them the first rank stepped forward in orderly manner: greatshield-bearing soldiers in heavy plate and short swords, a veritable wall on legs. Behind them the second rank set up, soldiers in mail coats handling halberds and the long hammers known as 'raven beaks'. The third and fourth ranks wielded the same mixture, though with heavier lean towards halberds, and behind them were kept in reserve our specialists.

We might not have the mage numbers the Legions of Terror could boast of, but we more than made up for that in priests. The House Insurgent had absolutely no qualms about using Light as much to burn undead as their more traditional colleagues used it for healing.

The commanding officer of our trial assault formation was a young man from Ankou by the name of Algernon Beesbury, who'd swiftly climbed up the ranks by virtue of having both a solid tactical acumen and a facility with languages. He'd been fluent in Chantant before even enrolling, as it happened, and served as one of General Hune's favourite vanguards during the Proceran campaign only to make it to tribune rank shortly after the Princes' Graveyard. Adjutant spoke well of his wits, too, which was even higher praise than Hune's several official commendations as far as I was concerned. Tribune Beesbury was not disappointing me so far, as he ordered a spreading of the formation when the undead pack began to splinter. The zombies would keep moving swiftly and purposefully so long as the Binds within their number remained unbroken, though compared to the skeleton waves I found the fleshier undead to have a certain... feral way about them. Their bite tended to be poisonous, too. The process that saw zombies rise anew made their gums bleed as they died and keep suppurating blood and pus for weeks after they were dead.

Though it might take a while to kill, foul blood in a wound was poison all the same.

"How many Binds in the lot, do you think?" I said.

"I'd say no more than five, Your Majesty," Grandmaster Brandon Talbot replied.

Keen-eyed as he watched the unfolding skirmish through his open visor, the commander of the Order of the Broken Bells was careful not to bring his own mount too close to mine. Zombie liked to snap at other horses and given that she smelled like Winter and death it tended to unnerve even Callowan war mounts. Glancing at the man I marvelled that his beard was still so neatly cut: the aristocrat seemed to make it a point of pride to remain nobly groomed even when out on campaign as we'd been for half a month now.

"They are looking pretty sloppy," I conceded, the two of us eyeing the dead as they closed the last of the distance.

When there were more Binds the necromancy binding the dead together was... tighter according to Masego, though he'd gotten a little lost in a greater metaphor about how the Dead King used necromancy entirely when explaining it. Regardless, in practice the presence of more Binds allowed those same undead more control over their lesser brethren, and finer control as well. Given that the Binds still had soul bound to their dead frames, hence the name, that tended to mean better tactics for the pack than simply rushing at whatever living were closest. Talbot and I kept our eyes on the zombies as they hit the outer line. To my pleasure, just as they'd been meant to they staked themselves on the spears. Not all of them did, for some avoided the jutting steel or simply tumbled forward with great enough speed they either broke the spear or ripped free of the point, but it broke the dead's momentum across the line.

"It would not work as well against skeletons," Captain Karolina Leisberg said, her Chantant accented in that attractively sharp Lycaonese way.

Where Grandmaster Talbot sat mounted at my right, the Iron Prince's representative sat the same at my left. Prince Klaus Papenheim had proved very much interested in our attempts to adjust war doctrine to the realities of war against Keter, to the extent that he'd sent one of the captains of his personal guard to have a look at this skirmish after I'd given him advance notice it would be taking place. That and I assumed he'd wanted eyes he trusted assessing how much damage the Dead King's latest nasty surprise had managed to sow behind our main lines. Gods, we were just lucky Tariq had caught the infiltrators before they made it into Brabant. If the fucking things had made it into one of those cramped refugee camps instead of being forced to prey on

the isolated towns and villages of southern Hainaut instead, the damage would have been staggering in scope.

"It'll still slow them by simple virtue of being in the way," I reminded Captain Leisberg. "The object is to sap their momentum before the lines hit, not score kills."

We'd learned the hard way that a wave of armoured skeletons could topple even a proper Legion shield wall by simple virtue of being so damned heavy, if it got enough room for a proper charge.

"And it seems to be working as intended," Brandon Talbot noted.

Eyes returning to the skirmish, I caught sight of exactly what he meant. I'd missed the first exchange, but the results left in its wake spoke for themselves: a long line of zombies, pulped or hacked down by the polearms and long hammers while the line of greatshields anchored against the ground effortlessly bounced off the few dead that made it close to enough to scabble at the wall of steel. The dead slowly forced their way behind the line of jutting spears but they were repeatedly butchered as they did until the mangled corpses were tall enough a pile that some of the zombies began using it as a way to leap above. There the halberds proved their worth over the raven beaks, a forest of jutting points that speared the few leapers clean through. Tribune Beesbury barked out an order and whistles were sounded by the sergeants. The mages and priests at the rear lashed out with flame and Light, providing cover to the rank of greatshields as it rose and retreated five paces before setting down again. They were adding depth to the killing floor to avoid further leapers, I noted approvingly. Hune's man was living up to her commendations.

"A pack is splitting off from the rest," Captain Leisberg pointed out.

Eyes flicking to the side of the skirmish, I saw the Lycaonese was right. Maybe thirty zombies and what must have been a Bind within the lot were peeling off from the slaughter on the plain, heading southwest. There were villages there, as I recalled, though not large ones – likely the reason they'd not been hit in the initial wave of contamination when two neighbouring small towns had. The infiltrators had aimed for numbers above all else, perhaps understanding that weaponless zombies would require as much to make a dent in a line of proper soldiery.

"Shall I send out one of the Order's wings, my queen?" Grandmaster Talbot offered.

I mulled on that a moment, even as the assault formation on the plains continued its methodical savaging of the remaining undead. This might be the least of the infantry the Dead King could field, but I was still rather encouraged by the day's results.

"That village we sent Lord Tanja to, what was it called again?" I asked.

"Pierreplate, I believe," Brandon Talbot replied.

"About half a bell away," I said. "And the one Lady Osená was meant to get moving was maybe another half bell further west."

"The Levantines should be returning, then," Captain Leisberg said, quickly catching on to my meaning.

Lord Razin Tanja, who was now truly the Lord of Malaga instead of merely the heir designate – his kin back in Levant had found a technicality that allowed him to claim the title without physically returning to the Dominion – should already have been back, truth be told. I rather suspected he'd waited for Lady Aquiline to finish covering the grounds I'd assigned her and catch up to him before heading back together. I was not one to grudge a young man his fancy for a lithe-limbed whirlwind of swagger and knives, especially when said whirlwind had legs like Aquiline Osená's, but if Tanja was under the impression that he could use our hours on the field to flirt with his betrothed he was in dire need of *instructional sparring* with Adjutant.

"Send a pair of riders to warn them, just in case they got sloppy with their own scouting," I ordered Talbot, eyes following the fleeing undead.

The Levantines, particularly the Tartessos foot, were actually better hand at this sort of thing than any of mine save for goblins so it was likely an unnecessary warning. Still, why indulge in a gamble when a sure thing was close at hand?

"By your will, Your Majesty," the grandmaster said, bowing his head.

He guided his horse away, leaving to pass along my command, but I kept my attention on the undead. They were using the shoddy dirt road headed southwest instead of just running across broken terrain, I noted, so there was definitely a Bind doing their thinking for them. Not that it'd help them much, given the region and season. The borderlands between southern Hainaut and northern Brabant were a strange place, to my eyes: flat stony plains were broken up by valley-like dips in the ground where greenery grew almost aggressively, though the part I'd grown to despise was the damned bogs. They were everywhere, though they always spread like the clap in an army camp after winter snows melted. For a few months every year the entire region became the favourite piss bowl of the Gods, which made campaigning around it deeply unpleasant. The only part that was mildly tolerable about the bogs was the way so many birds flocked to them, which made for good hunting and a change of fare when catches were made. The

road southwest was half-flooded by such a bog, which had lapped up at a turn already quite cramped up against a rocky hill.

It was half-expectantly that I watched that narrow passage as the dead neared it. If I'd been trying to lay an ambush around here, that was where I would have done it. Painted faces crested the hill and a heartbeat later a volley of javelins scythed through the flank of the zombie pack. Wouldn't be enough to put any of those down for good, but it'd pin and tumble quite a few as well as disrupt their 'formation'. I was not the only one looking, though, I noted.

"That'd be the Tartessos foot," I told Captain Leisberg. "Those call themselves slayers in honour of the Silent Slayer, the heroine that founded the ruling line of the city."

Lady Aquiline herself claimed direct descent from the woman, and for all I knew it might even be true. I'd never seen any people half so obsessed with Blood as the Levantines, save for actual Praesi blood mages.

"They are wearing almost as much paint as armour, and most of that leather," Karolina Leisberg skeptically said.

Lycaonese, I had found, held what I could only deem a very reasonable sort of respect for the virtues of putting on good steel armour whenever it was even remotely possible to get away with it. The way some of the Levantines disdained it was utterly baffling to them, and unfortunately that was one of the least contentious ways their cultures seemed to rub each other wrong. The way the Dominion held single combat as a glorious thing, in particular, had a way of earning aggressive contempt from the northerners. It was, I'd come to believe, the difference between a people that held war as an honourable duty and one that held war as honourable, period. There were no frills to Lycaonese ways: if it worked, it did not matter how ugly or unfair or harsh the way of getting it done was. Captain Leisberg hadn't come across an honour duel, at least. Those always made the Lycaonese fall into black temper. There was a reason I'd ensured they were encamped at opposite ends whenever I could even though it was a headache to organize. These days I sometimes felt more like a juggler than a general or a queen. *And the moment I drop a single ball*, I thought, *people will die*.

It was a sobering thought, and the source of much of my patience these days.

"Slayers are monster-killers by training, not line infantry," I told her. "They're used to fighting things that consider plate little more than the crunchy part of the meal. I expect that when we finally get the Unravellers they'll be the ones fielding them for our front."

The woman's eyes brightened, for I'd said the magic word: *Unravellers*. The sheer intensity of the lust the Lycaonese held for those artefacts surprised me almost every time, though perhaps it shouldn't. We'd been fighting the alchemical monstrosities of the Dead King for not even two years while their kind had been the proverbial rock in Keter's boot for centuries.

"I'd heard the Workshop deemed them unfeasible," Captain Leisberg said.

Unfeasible wasn't exactly the right word. The first few attempts at making artefacts that disrupted necromancy had either been violently explosive failures or run into what Masego deemed a 'proportioning' problem, namely that those first attempts simply didn't have enough sorcery or Light in them to successfully unravel something like a wyrm or a beorn. Our people had eventually succeeded at making an artefact that *could* hold that much power, but it'd been a material solution. As in, the materials used in the making of that thing were about as expensive as arming two cohorts in full Legion standard. That'd been bad enough, but they'd also been quite rare: in particular, the kind of eldritch lumber they'd used grew only in the southern stretches of the Waning Woods. Which meant importing it in large quantities was a half-baked daydream. The Belfry had since claimed a breakthrough in figuring out a structural workaround, though, and fresh plans had been passed along to the Workshop a month past. We'd learn if they were truly functional soon enough, at least in principle.

I'd only venture to call it a true success after shoving a spear inside one of those fucking undead dragons collapsed the whole thing, instead of requiring three Named and a full mage contingent to get that job done.

"Might not be, after all," I said. "Though I'll not count the chickens before they're ha- Razin Tanja, you *shit*."

It'd been a beautiful little ambush, pretty as a pearl: javelins first, then a dozen Malaga foot had emerged to block the road, raising a shield wall the zombies promptly threw themselves against. The slayers had leapt into the chaotic melee and scythed through the lesser undead with almost laughable ease, Lady Aquiline Osená among them. Quick enough all that was left from the massacre was the Bind that'd led the pack. They should have killed it first, by my reckoning, since the zombies would regress to almost animal thoughtlessness after it was broken, but the reason why they hadn't had became rather clear when Razin Tanja stepped forward in chainmail and leather, a hooked sword in hand. The Levantines formed a circle around the two, those with shields in front, and took to shoving the undead back into the middle of the makeshift battle circle when it strayed too far from the Lord of Malaga.

"Foolish," the Lycaonese captain said at the sight, and I grunted in agreement.

Not that Aquiline was any better when it came to this sort of stuff: if anything she was much, much worse. The Grey Pilgrim had made clear that the two lordlings were to listen to my orders, so at least they usually obeyed when I was there to keep an eye on them, but when I wasn't this sort of inanity still cropped up with depressing regularity. It was like someone had chopped out the part of their brains where common sense was and replaced it with *glorious single combat* instead. Gods, I supposed I should be glad at least they weren't stabbing each other. Apparently the sole Dominion aristocrat killed at the Graveyard – Razin's own father – had not been slain by one of mine or the Tyrant's but instead by the Lord of Alava. I was rather glad that one had ended up on Malanza's front, even if he'd been somewhat easy on the eyes. On the plains the assault company under Tribune Beesbury was cleaning up the last of the zombies with admirable thoroughness and without much trouble, so I decided the Levantines were due the first visit. I could personally praise Beesbury and his three hundred for their work later.

"Grandmaster Talbot," I called out.

Zombie moved under the pressure of my knees almost eagerly, and I could tell she was itching for a flight. I patted her mane fondly.

"Later," I told her.

The leader of the Broken Bells was not long in attending me after the summons, and as a sign that he was getting used to my ways he'd come riding with twenty knights and my banner instead of a courtier's manners.

"Good man," I smiled at him, then turned to my knights. "Lord Tanja seems intent on putting on a spectacle. Wouldn't it be poor manners to fail to indulge him?"

There were a few smiles, and even a laugh. Though Levant's soldiery was not hated among my people, neither was it liked. It had not been forgot that a campaign had been fought against them in Iserre, or that they'd been part of the Grand Alliance back when it was still just a pack of hounds baying for fresh meat. Callowan meat, at least in part. I flicked a questioning glance at Captain Leisberg, to see if she wanted to accompany us, but she shook her head. With a courteous dip of mine I took my leave, staff of yew laid across Zombie's back as we took the lead on our ride down the hill. I kept a brisk pace and made no pretence of hiding my approach, so the Levantines saw us long before we came. Tanja finished his opponent before I got close enough to hail him, a clean blow that carved through the Bind's spine under the throat. The head, still wrapped in leathery but seemingly living

flesh, tumbled to the ground. The Levantines let out a cheer. Hiding my irritation, I spurred Zombie onwards quicker, not slowing as I came upon the ring of soldiers surrounding the victorious young Lord of Malaga.

The warriors had to hastily scatter out of my way and instead of pulling on my reins I let Zombie enter the ring at a trot, circling Tanja. So maybe I wasn't hiding my irritation that much, all things considered. By the time Zombie had slowed to a halt, there was only silence surrounding me.

"Hail, Black Queen," Lady Aquiline called out.

"We'll get to you in a moment, Lady Osená," I flatly replied.

Lord Razin Tanja looked up at me with defiant eyes, his tanned skin and coal-black hair framed tight by his helm. It wouldn't do to upbraid him like a child in front of his own men and his betrothed, I reminded myself, even though it was tempting to allow myself to spit out a few scathing lines that'd cut him down to size. On the other hand, it wouldn't do to simply let this go either. He and Osená had been testing me more often lately, as if pushing to see how much I'd take from them. If I gave them an inch now, they'd be reaching for another before day's end. I stared down the Lord of Malaga without blinking until, reluctantly, he opened his mouth.

"Hail, Black Queen," Razin Tanja greeted me.

"And to you, Lord Razin," I calmly replied. "Now, would you care to explain to me why you were tormenting what is most likely the soul of an ancient crusader bound by dark sorcery into unwilling service to the Hidden Horror?"

Ah, the embarrassed silence of someone who'd not quite considered the implications of what they were doing. How nostalgic. I could see why people had done this to me so often, if it was always this darkly satisfying to be standing on this side of the exercise.

"Well?" I prompted amicably. "Do go on. I'm sure your reasons will be... enlightening."

That was just twisting the knife but then I wasn't Razin's mother. I had absolutely no interest in caring for his bruises, be they on his skin or his pride.

"The Volignac companies are already back at camp, last I heard," I casually said. "Because they saw no need to play around with corpses, they're having first crack at the ale rations that just got shipped in from Brabant."

I'd ordered some set aside for the assault formation too, as either reward or comfort for the way the skirmish went, but I saw no pressing need to mention that. Knowledge they'd be laying claim only to what the Procerans saw fit to leave behind went over with the Levantines about as well as I'd figured it would. There wasn't an army on the continent that didn't run on drink and brothels, save perhaps the one we were pitted against.

"It was a good kill," Lady Aquiline said, rallying to the defence of her betrothed.

Gallantly, some might have argued. Some but not me. My eyes flicked to her painted face, hardening.

"Made by a man half a bell late on his march back to camp," I said. "I don't suppose you have anything to say about *that*, Lady Osen?"

Embarrassment once more, and matching silence. And she should be damn well be embarrassed: they'd been sent out to ensure none of the zombie-makers had gotten or could get at villages, not to mess about. And considering they'd gone out with two hundred warriors each and there couldn't be more than fifty here with them right now, they couldn't even pretend with the parchment-thin claim they'd linked up for safety in numbers. For now, I'd generously assume the other warriors were left behind to be thorough in ensuring the safety of the evacuating Proceran civilians, though I'd be sure to ask pointed questions about this later. I was making no friends among the Levantines here by asserting my authority so bluntly, but then I didn't need to be liked by these people. Only obeyed, and they'd been growing lax about that lately.

"Return to camp," I said, eyes sweeping across the ranks. "I'll expect a distinct lack of detours, this time."

It felt like I was spanking unruly children, which was all the more galling for not being entirely untrue. Neither of them were all that far from me in age, though sometimes I felt more like tired old Klaus Papenheim than the woman of twenty-three I truly was. I could understand why Tariq wanted me to keep an eye on them, too, to both meanings of that. For all their sloppy habits and general recklessness, the two Levantine nobles made for a very charismatic pair when they weren't straining my patience. Both brave and skilled at arms, and while Aquiline was a finer blade and the most popular of the two it was Razin I'd found had the firmer grasp on politics. If the Grey Pilgrim was in the market for successors to keep the Dominion stable after he died, then these two were by far his best bet from the current crop of the Blood.

Sadly, this did not in any way make them less of a trial to deal with.

I didn't linger around the Levantines any longer, guiding Zombie out of the battle circle as my knightly escort and Grandmaster Talbot fell in. The man who'd once been the heir to Marchford rode up to my side as we returned to the hill that'd served as our earlier vantage point.

"The Levantine fondness for duels truly is a tawdry habit," Brandon Talbot said. "It has no place in proper war-making."

"Duels are useful when they can be used to demoralize the enemy," I disagreed.

I'd myself duelled in the past, after all, and sent others to do the same on my behalf. Usually I'd done it to kill a Named foe before they could inflict great losses on my soldiers, or eliminate a titled fae before they could unleash a large working, but there was a reason I didn't use that method unless there was no other choice. Fighting on the front bound your soldiers to you in ways that could be hard to explain – it'd been my willingness to fight on the frontlines that'd first won me loyalty in the Fifteenth – but there was a difference between that and seeking out every duel there was to be had out there. One was sharing risk, the other courting death. Even the Lady of the Lake picked her fights and fled when they turned south on her.

"The dead have no morale," the Grandmaster said, and I didn't disagree. "Which makes all this posturing rather puerile."

"Lord Tanja is young and in need of proving himself to his warriors," I said. "Lady Osen's bloodline is famous for such duels, so there is a reputation to uphold."

"Facts which did not seem to hinder you in the slightest from disciplining them," the older man said, sounding faintly amused.

"Because if they pull something like that against a Revenant after these little victories let them think they're champions, they'll get themselves slaughtered like lambs," I grimly said. "And while it might be a fool's errand to expect Levantines to discard centuries of customs, I'll expect them to at least bend those to accommodate the realities of the war for survival we're fighting."

Neshamah could afford to toss fifty thousand Binds in a pit and forget about them until Last Dusk, if he felt like it. If half the visions the Sisters shared with me of the drow front in the deep north were accurate, then that was the kind of force he was willing to throw away on a fucking *distraction*. On the other hand, if either of the Dominion nobles got themselves killed the Grand Alliance had a damned mess on its hands. Whether it was about succession, command of their armies or even the casting of blame that'd no doubt follow there would be no part of it that wouldn't end up a nasty turn. So when I saw them playing duellist

with undead, you might say my temper rose just a tad at the sight. Even in the wildest streaks of my days as Squire I'd never been reckless for recklessness' sake, much less acted so blithely unaware of the stakes at play.

"Doesn't matter," I finally sighed. "They're only in my charge until we've swept the region clean. We'll be moving on to other things afterwards, and the Pilgrim can shepherd his own cats."

"Another day's march south and we'll have reached into Brabantine lands proper," the bearded knight said. "We ought to be encountering the first of Prince Étienne's forward patrols come morning, and soon after our duty will be discharged."

"Looking forward to a stay in a proper city?" I teased.

"A warm bath," Brandon Talbot reverently said, "and food not cooked in a cauldron. The Heavens smile upon us indeed."

I chuckled. It was funny, the way months in the field could turn the simplest of things into luxuries. I was, myself, looking forward to finally getting a decent drink as well as a full night's sleep: wherever lay diplomacy also lay quality wine and wards good enough I wouldn't need to sleep with one eye open. Hanno was due back from out west, too, which would be nice. It was always easier when he was there to foist off chores o— *share the burdens with*, I'd of course meant, in an absolutely equal and unbiased manner.

"Let's get this business over with, then," I said. "I've had about as much as I can stomach of spring in these parts and the walking dead do nothing to improve the scenery."

"I'd hardly noticed a difference," Brandon Talbot drily said.

Let it not be said that one of my people had ever willingly let an occasion to rag on Procer pass them by. We returned to the hilltop only to learn that Captain Leisberg had already taken her leave and headed back to camp, from where she'd be changing mounts and riding straight for Prince Klaus' forces further north by the main roads. While I was somewhat irked she'd not stayed around long enough to discuss her impressions of the day's skirmish and the performance of the assault formation, she was not under my command and owed me nothing save perhaps the occasional courtesy. Odds were I'd need to have that talk with the Iron Prince himself, which truth be told I hardly minded. The First Prince's uncle was an old soldier of a breed that was deeply familiar to me: I'd spent most of my life either serving them drinks, fighting them or leading them in battle. If the man had known a few rebel songs and told a story about some wound he took during the Conquest, it might have been enough to make me homesick.

It was brisk business after my return, organizing the return of our soldiers to camp and sending out riders to check on the forces we'd sent further out. While we'd be keeping a force of knights here in case an undead force had slipped our notice and reinforcements were needed by one of our detachments, there was no real need for me to stay here to supervise in person. Grandmaster Talbot was perfectly capable of handling this without my breathing down his neck. Consequently, I'd been preparing to ride away with an escort when Zombie suddenly shivered in discomfort. She'd only ever done that around a single man, which meant it was no deep mystery as to who had finally emerged from the wilds again. It was hard to tell how old the man was, or where he came from, though Indrani had once told me he was only a few years older than her.

Between the tan and the filth, though he could have been from anywhere from twenty to forty and passed as anything but Soninke. I'd expected a Named of his bent to be athletic, but instead he was built like a bear: tall and broad-framed but undeniably heavysset. His clothes were thick leather, save for the fur boots and the beautiful hood he always kept up: lined in ermine and made of fox, it was beautifully sown and it seemed a waste it would be pressed up against long matted brown hair. A long knife and a hatchet at his side, the man might have passed for a warrior of some sort if not for the most eye-catching thing about him: the two great falcons seated on his shoulders, watching me with unnatural poise.

"Beastmaster," I greeted him, turning and betraying no hint of surprise at his sudden presence.

"Black Queen," the man rasped out. "I have found you a quarry."

My eyes narrowed. I'd not expected there to truly be one born from this crisis, as we'd been swift in crushing it. It was worrying it had anyway, even though I'd known the possibility was there. Events were quickening at brisker a pace than even our worst predictions.

"Where are they?" I asked.

"He," the Beastmaster said. "East."

"Where east?" I impatiently said.

"It will be easy to find," the Beastmaster replied, hacking out a laugh. "It is the only village on fire."

Shit, I thought. Couldn't I, just the once, get an easy Named to bring into the fold?

Chapter 2: Enlistment

"My lords and ladies, have I not always been a firm believer in second chances?"

– Dread Empress Malevolent II, announcing her second (and penultimate) invasion of Callow

This would be the fifth one I brought in, so to speak.

The first time I'd come across a new Named was maybe two weeks after the first proper battle that'd followed Callow entering the war, which one of my own soldiers had jauntily named the 'Scrap at the Gap' only to see the quip tumble down into the pages of history. It'd been our first use of a pharos device, and the proliferation of gates out of the Twilight Ways had allowed us to take the dead flatfooted. The soldiers under Volignac and Papenheim had rallied with burning rage in their bellies, and we'd turned the chase around on Keter: we'd forced the dead to retreat and even dented the Grey Legion.

At the time we'd believed we could reclaim all of Hainaut if we struck out aggressively enough, so we'd concentrated on reclaiming the roads and strongholds of the western region of principality: the aim had been to establish a solid defensive line all the way to the border with Cleves and after solidifying root out the dead as we moved north in a Hainaut-wide curtain. No one had expected there to be anything still living in the region, for Keter had had the run of it for months, which was why when the Tartessos scouts had begun finding the remains of small undead raiding packs we'd expected a monster and not a half-feral woman in her seventies.

The Stained Sister had shattered Hakram's shoulder and nearly blinded him when we'd gone out to find what might be lurking in the hills. She'd been one of Hanno's, not mine, for even three days buried up to her neck in the corpses of everyone she'd ever known had not been enough to break her faith in Above. She'd listened anyway, when I laid down the law as it had been agreed on: so long as Named were willing to take up arms against Keter, they would fall under the aegis of the Truce and Terms.

Amnesty was offered to all willing to join the war against extinction, and peace would be kept between villains and heroes until the Dead King was no more. For those who were sworn to Above, the White Knight stood as representative in councils and first among equals. For those that dwelled in Below's shadow, the same duties fell to me. It was a simple enough arrangement, in principle. In practice it'd been as about as horribly complex and strenuous a state of affairs as I'd expected it to be, and it'd been a very long time since I was last called an optimist.

I'd picked up two more during our offensive to take back the capital late last summer, the two of them pretty middling villains – one lowlife gambler who'd managed to survive by stealing other people's luck and using it to avoid and escape the dead, the other a hedge mage who'd slit open her own brother's throat to fuel an enchantment that made her invisible to Dead King's armies but was now beset by his furious shade. Half-starved and almost pathetically grateful to be given shelter, the two of them had accepted the Truce and Terms without batting an eye. Unsurprisingly, getting them to toe the line afterwards had been more difficult.

The Pilfering Dicer now had nine fingers to illustrate the point that stealing the luck of my soldiers wasn't something you could talk your way out of, but at least I'd pawned off the mage to Indrani for her roving band and gotten only praise about her since. The Dicer I'd sent instead to the First Prince, as his talents were best suited for the sort of battles she was fighting on our behalf. The fourth had been both the easiest and the worst, in some ways, for though he'd come to me instead of the other way around it would be very much a delusion to claim I had any sort of *control* over the Beastmaster.

As I could not help but be reminded when the man opened his eyes, breathing out deeply.

"There are still a few," Beastmaster said. "Three or four. Less than earlier."

I looked at the great blaze across the half-dug dry moat and grimaced. It was rather surprised anyone but the fresh Named was still living.

"And you didn't consider helping them flee when you first noticed?" I replied, tone curt.

"And risk the ire of a green Named who could already do *this*?" Beastmaster snorted, gesturing towards the village.

The falcon that'd flown over the nameless village returned to its master's shoulder, undisturbed at having leant him its eyes while it was still up there. The Named at my side might not be anywhere as proficient a combatant as someone like Indrani or Hanno, but his talents were surprisingly broad in application and it'd be a rough affair to put him down if it came to that: I'd seen some of the creatures the Beastmaster used as mounts, and none of them were beasts to take lightly even without a rider on their back. More than anything else the man had proved his worth as eyes up in the sky even in regions where scrying might be disrupted, as was becoming increasingly common. His stable of birds of prey currently had a better record at tracking people than our sorcery, since even young Names could sometimes disrupt scrying

ritual. There was a reason I kept the man close, and it wasn't his charm or sunny disposition.

"If he meant to kill them, they'd already be," I said, tone grown sharp.

Matted hair pressed against the side of his eyebrow, thick with filth, the man shrugged apathetically. I wasn't sure whether Beastmaster had been born a prick or he'd been taught the ancient ways of prickery by one of the finest practitioners of the art alive – the Ranger herself – but his utter unwillingness to risk so much as the tip of his toe for another's sake had a way of raising my hackles. Even when Indrani had been fresh out of Refuge and the Lady's tutelage she'd not been this... savagely unconcerned with everything that went on around her.

"Fine," I said. "Tell my knights where the survivors are, they'll help them out. Where's the boy?"

"The House of Light," Beastmaster said.

If this was going to be one of the religious ones, I really hoped it'd made it this far north that the Salian Conclave had struck down its decree naming me the Arch-heretic of the East. If I was lucky, they might even have heard that instead the Dead King had been proclaimed Arch-heretic Eternal. *Lucky, huh. That'd be the fucking day.* I whistled loudly, Grandmaster Talbot riding up without missing a beat or betraying irritation at the somewhat undignified summons.

"Beastmaster had eyes on survivors," I told the knight. "Have some your people get them out. Our healers are fresh?"

"Good as, my liege," Brandon Talbot replied. "Though I'll caution once more they are not the finest of that trade."

Yeah, the House Insurgent did tend to have that little defect. You couldn't learn to burn with Light without missing out on the deeper secrets of healing, apparently. The Grey Pilgrim had once told me it was more a consequence of mindset than a hard limit of ability, but then there was no one alive who could use Light the way Tariq Fleetfoot did – not even Hanno, who had the shade of near every dead hero up in the library shelves of his head.

"Have them do what they can," I grimly said.

Burns were nasty way to go.

"I'll be seeing to the hero," I added a moment later. "Hurry with the survivors, Talbot."

The man nodded, and after a nod to the Beastmaster – who bothered himself to return it, though seemingly with great effort – I rode

out. This place must have been a nice little village, once upon a time. How many people had lived here? One hundred, two hundred? Couldn't be more than that. There was rarely such a thing as a proper street in places like this, even a dirt one, and this village was no exception. There were a tighter cluster of once-thatched houses now blazing up trails of smoke surrounding what might have once been a village market, but aside from that houses and shops had been raised rather haphazardly. They were scarcer on the outskirts, with the house nearest to the unfinished ditch standing entirely alone.

Zombie did not even need to jump over the trench, as a quick walk around the edge of what had been dug accomplished the same result rather less dramatically. It'd been poor sense, trying to dig a dry moat in so wide a circle. The villagers would have done better trying the same further in, or better yet raising a palisade instead. There was no way the work could have been finished in time to repel the dead, not with the numbers they had. What I'd been looking for was a mere three steps away from the edge of the finished ditch, slumped and still. I slowed my mount, frowning as I leant down to turn the corpse with the tip of my staff. At first glance the killing looked like it'd been done with Light, a hole torn right through the chest of the still-living woman, but the edges were too blackened. Charred.

Light was cleaner than this when used on living people, even those corrupted by curses and sorcery. Light and fire threaded together? Unusual. I would have thought someone more prone into coming a Name apt to wielding that if they'd been forged from a great fire, not the *source* of one. Hooves sounded against the ground behind me, a belated escort of knights. It was still a reflex for me to argue against the necessity of one, but there'd been twenty-three different assassination attempts against me in the last year. Few had even come close, but I'd been taught the virtues of having eyes other than mine and armoured bodies in the way of harm.

"I'll be entering the House alone," I spoke without turning.
"I'll not have numbers spooking our friend."

"If you so order, my queen," Grandmaster Talbot replied, the genteel disapproval in his tone clear.

I rolled my eyes. If the boy who'd done this still had fighting on his mind it was a lot more likely I'd end up protecting my escort than the other way around. I let the body I'd been examining slump back against the ground and spurred Zombie onwards. We passed through the outskirts briskly, though I slowed once more to verify the sort of injuries on other corpses were the same as the first before heading deeper in. Towards what should have been the market, as well as the small dirt path beyond it and led to the sole building in the village that was

tall stone with a tiled slate roof: the House of Light. There the Named would be waiting, I knew, though I would not cross the threshold before figuring out exactly what it was I was dealing with here. Whether the boy was a hero, a villain or of those whose Role tread that narrow path where circumstance could cast you as either did not matter so much as the fact that he'd seemingly butchered an entire village.

If he was a hero, as the use of Light to kill would imply, he was unlikely to be the kind I got along with.

We closed in on the market, where the roar of the flames was almost deafening. Wary of entering the central grounds, where heat had hardened and cracked the muddy grounds, I led Zombie into lingering at the edge of the circle in one of the larger gaps. There'd been an inn among the lot of them, I noted, though it was hard to tell exactly how large it'd once been. It'd been hit hardest of all the village: the walls had been torn through with great blasts of Light, then the ceiling had fallen and caught fire. Even that rubble, though, was not enough to hide the sheer number of corpses there'd been inside. Those the flames had not yet devoured were close to the door, some even just out into the 'street'. They, I saw, had been hit in the back. The Grandmaster of the Order of the Broken Bells caught up to me as I sat studying the burning inn, face betraying utter disgust what he beheld.

"Gods," Brandon Talbot rasped out. "Even the children."

Only one of those was untouched by flame, pale brown hair fanning her face like a veil but doing nothing to hide the black-rimmed hole that'd torn through the middle of her back. There were bones I could see in the embers and flame, though, that even blackened could not me mistaken for those of a grown man. And yet. Gods, and yet.

"Do you still remember that skirmish just a week away from the capital, last summer?" I quietly said. "What happened to that company of Volignac outriders, when they found that little village tucked away in the reeds."

"The dead wearing the guises of children," the bearded knight said, tone sickened. "I'd heard. I do not blame them for fleeing, Your Majesty. I am not certain if I could have done it myself, striking down infants with knight's steel."

And so Neshamah's abominations would have torn you down from your horse and clawed out your throat, I thought, the way they did too many of those honourable outriders. Honour has no place on this field. Not against the kind of foe we face. My voice came out cool, a warning under the swirling columns of smoke.

"This is not a war, Brandon Talbot, where hurried judgements thrive. Do not forget that."

Yet sometimes I wondered if that was not Below's game, lurking behind everything else. Even if we won against Keter what kind of creatures would we have become when we emerged from the crucible? Already I'd grown wary of castigating the slaughter of children without knowing more of how it'd come to be, and we'd yet to even step into the Dead King's lands. There was an old saying about the dangers of looking into the abyss that most peoples of Calernia held some form or another of. It'd been taught to me at the orphanage as 'beware of matching horror's eyes, lest it gaze back into yours', one of those Old Miezian sentences turned into proverbs only nobles and priests ever seemed to quote. The thing, though, was that horror wasn't sickness. It wasn't something that tainted you from watching it or fighting it, like ink or filth or oil.

Horror, horror was a *pit*.

It was a deep dark hole the world pushed you into, remorseless. Sometimes the only way through was to wade through the deeps of it, do whatever it took, and there lay the trouble: even if you got to climb out, after, who you'd been in that pit would never leave you. Gods, it'd be reassuring if it was a taint that'd made the decision for you, but it wasn't. Not really. It was just you, when you were scared and cold and desperate and *didn't want to die*. That tended to be an uglier sight than devils, in my experience. Nowadays Calernia was being dragged into the pit, one inch after another, and there were nights where that thought kept me from sleeping. Lessons learned in the deeps of pit were long in being unlearned, if they ever were at all. What kind of a world was it, that Cordelia Hasenbach and I would end up raising out of the ashes of the old?

"I sometimes wonder if even heroes are worth it," Grandmaster Talbot softly said, "if they must always be born of such grief."

"Men murder men," I said. "They rob and cheat and lie. From all I know we've done so since the First Dawn and will keep on doing it until the Last Dusk. Don't blame the blade for the heat of the forge, Talbot."

I bared my teeth.

"Blame the fucker who lit the furnace."

Though in this case, I thought, the two might just be the same. My gaze had moved on from the inn, swept across the rest of this would-be marketplace, and a story had unfolded before my eyes. It'd begun with the inn. There had been a gathering there, with perhaps as many as a hundred packed tight inside. The Named had let loose his power, moved to violence by something, and then the

nightmare had begun. The villagers had been packed too tightly: panic and stampede began to kill them just as much as the power unleashed. The place had caught fire, smoke and heat further stirring the pot, and even as some tried to escape through the back the Named had left by the front to strike down the few that'd successfully escaped. The relief inside was short-lived, as the roof collapsed not long after.

From there, the tale grew murkier. I'd wager that the noise and escapees had moved those few villagers with a weapon to try to kill the Named, and he'd reacted... harshly. I'd yet to catch sight of him going for anything but a killing blow. From there it looked like the boy had swept through the village, heading to wherever he saw movement and killing until there was no one left save for a handful of hidden survivors. He'd then limped back to the House of Light, either exhausted or wounded or both. I breathed out, almost comforted by what I'd grasped. I was not dealing with coldblooded thrill-killer or a broken bird grown dragon's claws: wildly wandering around striking down those who moved in a panic was a mark of lapsed control. Lack of premeditation, too.

This was too much fear and too much power, not the first atrocity of a great monster in the making.

"You seem grieved, my queen," the knight quietly said, voice almost drowned out by the blaze.

"Better it had been a monster, Talbot," I tiredly said. "One of those I would have been able to use without guilt."

Zombie pulled ahead, answering my mood before my knee gave the order. The breeze shifted: like raking claws, threads of smoke were blown across our path. We rode through and broke the ghostly shackles, flanked by the unforgiving blaze on both sides as my mount's hooves broke the hardened mud beneath them. And then, quick as a stolen kiss, the heat and smoke were gone. We tread then the path to the House of Light, where flame had not reached. Yet blood had, for it was smeared over the wooden door left slightly ajar. I dismounted smoothly, though not so smoothly that I did not hiss in pain when my bad leg touched the ground, and lay a light slap against Zombie's rump. She left to wander, gait unhurried, and a last look over my shoulder quelled any thought my knights might have held of following me inside. The Mantle of Woe trailing behind me, leaning on my staff of yew as I limped forward, I cracked the door open just enough to slip in and entered the temple.

There was a skylight. That was the first thing I noticed. Though a village like this was too poor to afford glass windows and so the walls had been full stone, a clever trick of architecture had allowed for the making of a skylight in what I'd taken to be just a lightly angled roof. And it had been cleverly done, too, as it

was carved to allow for the sun's journey through the day. The stone floor had been painted with scenes from the Book of All Things and different times of the day would see light fall on different parts. It had been most ingeniously built, for a temple in the middle of nowhere. Procerans: so much to hold in contempt, so much to admire. Light fell from above on the painted scene of Gods in black and white standing on both sides of the wan silhouette of a woman, theirs hands held out. A choice offered.

The drying trail of blood that'd trickled down all the way to the woman was one of those vicious little ironies Creation was so fond of offering.

My staff struck the floor as I limped up, sounding obscenely loud in the silence of this place. At my sides roughly hewn benches, some of which had been toppled by struggle or negligence, only made it more palpable how *empty* the House was. At the very back, behind the painted scenes and the light, two bodies lay slumped. One was that of a priest, still clad in his pale robes. He was dead, a long cut-like wound opened from one shoulder to the opposite hip – and though it still bled blood, all the way to the painted stone, the outer edges of it were charred. Eyes wide open and unseeing of the sun pouring through the skylight, the back of his head lay against the altar he'd once tended to. Against the other side of the altar, bloodied and burned, lay the young boy who'd butchered more than a hundred souls beyond the gates of this place.

His face was a charred ruin. Stories, when they spoke of burns at all, delighted in telling of villains whose burn scars were disfiguring marks warning of wickedness. In a few there was even shoddy symbolism attempted: a face half-burned, the duality of a man's soul, Good and Evil at war. The boy's face just looked like someone had held it down against a fucking fire, and there was nothing elegant or symbolic about that. It was just pain and ugliness and pus, having devoured an uneven two-thirds of the face of a kid who couldn't be more sixteen. It'd taken an eye with it, or close enough, as it had grown a clouded grey instead of whatever colour it'd once held. On the right side, on the part left untouched by fire, a lone blue eye and closely cut black hair were almost incongruously healthy compared to the rest of the young Named.

The boy wore a leather jerkin and woolen trousers, both so worn as to be near rags, and his shoes were little more than leather strips wrapped around a flat wooden sole. The wound I'd suspected he might have proved to be a knife slash on his leg, though not near anything that'd kill him. It'd still gone untreated and soaked the wool red. Not that infection was likely to kill him, now that he was Named. It was exhaustion, pain and horror keeping him down.

"Are you to be my punishment?" the boy rasped out. "I have sinned and do not deny it."

Gods, I thought, stricken. He sounded so very resigned.

"Have you?" I said, making myself sound only mildly interested. "Tell me about it."

"I am-"

"That is yet to be determined," I mildly said, cutting in. "Tell me about the killings."

The Alamans boy – and he must be that, for his accent in Chantant had that lakeside twang to it – forced himself to focus. His blue eye fluttered and the cloudy one turned to me as well, some thought returning to the gaze. He watched me and I returned the look, leaning on my dead staff of yew.

"You are not," the Named said, "an angel."

My answering smile was thin and sharp.

"Not," I agreed, "in any sense of the word."

"Who are you, then?" the boy rasped out.

"The judge, child," I said. "And if comes to that, the other two as well."

The Named laughed, though the convulsion twisted him in pain.

"A fitting end," he said. "I took their lives, stranger. I blinded and burned until nothing was left. How do you judge *that*?"

"Sloppy," I said, tone cool. "The inn was the correct place to begin, but to let loose while you were still inside? Sloppy is almost too kind a word. Packed that tight, all it took was a stroke of luck and any one of them might have caved your head in. You should have left, barred the doors and only then started the flames."

The boy's face twisted with rage at my indifference.

"I couldn't know if they were all-"

He stopped, biting his tongue. *Ah*, I thought. *There it is*. He'd wanted me to splatter him across the stones, justice swiftly done and harshly meted. But there'd been something more about this, a part still obscured. And where gentleness would unearth nothing this wounded child wanted buried, calculated callousness might just bait it out.

"You're not from here, are you?" I mused. "You've got that lakeside twang, like you're always chewing. It's a long way south, for a boy of no great means."

Lack of boots meant his family had never been even remotely wealthy. Refugee, it had me guessing. From one of the later waves, long after soldiery had ceased escorting civilians south.

"What does it matter?" the boy asked.

"Means either you came with someone," I said, "or you were capable of making it alone."

"Did you not see my work outside, stranger?" the Named mocked.

Confirmed, then, that the power wielded there was something he'd had for some time.

"I saw your convulsing terror burned across a few hundred people," I agreed. "So what is it that had you so scared, boy?"

The Named grit his teeth.

"I am-"

"Meat, until I deem it otherwise," I interrupted once more, tone gone cold. "So speak, *boy*."

I saw anger, in eyes both blue and clouded, and anger was an anchor. I knew that as bone deep as I knew my limp and the sound Liesse had made when it broke. It would keep him grounded in the here and now, at least long enough for our talk.

"It was too late," he snarled. "The disease was in them, same as it was in Maman. And I told them, told them I could see it and they needed to send for a *real* priest, but they just wouldn't *listen*-"

His mouth closed with a snap.

"I do not beg for my life," the boy said. "I do not quibble nor defend."

And it fell into place, just like that. The ditch begun but abandoned, the way so many of them had been gathered in the same place.

"They were going to leave," I said.

I saw I had the right of it in the boy's eyes, even if he denied me an answer. A makeshift caravan of some sort, most likely, headed further south for one of the great refugee camps. When I'd last gotten a report on the seeded plague from the Grey Pilgrim, he'd mentioned his worry that there might yet be carriers in who

the disease would be sleeping. Lying in wait. He'd caught the infiltrators headed for Brabant himself, but not even heroes could be everywhere. If the boy was right and the villagers had slipped further south without being caught? Thousands dead, should we be *lucky*. And we'd be putting out that fire for months instead of heading north as we needed to, losing a good chunk of the war season. *This might not be the only village where it was attempted*, I thought. *If it was attempted all*, I also considered, *and the boy did not simply go mad with enough will it became... more.*

I'd need Akua to study the bodies as well few survivors we'd pulled out. More than that, if this was the plan within the Dead King's plan then I needed to put out a warning there might be other villages like this out there. Villages that'd not had the mixed of luck of being stumbled upon by a Named.

"I couldn't let them," the boy said. "And they weren't real miracles, I know the priests said so, but they *worked*."

My gaze moved to the priest, dead and cold, the wound that was bloody but hardly mortal. If you could heal, anyway, use the Light. The boy was no natural wielder of Light, I realized, smiled upon by the Heavens and bestowed some manner of searing holy flame. But he did have a power he'd been born with. An eye for recognizing a magically seeded disease, the ability to wield highly concentrated light and flame in short bursts while losing control of it upon release? Those were the marks of a wild talent, a born mage. And one of great power, to have torn through a village while so unschooled. *How badly you must have wanted to be anything but a mage*, I thought, *for the only magic you ever used to be such a close mimicry of the Light*. It was heartbreaking. That he'd been warped into this, that he'd been broken after even that and then forced to look a truth in the eye: he had the power to fight back against horror, just this once.

So long as he was willing to make a horror of his own.

"It was," I mused, "an easy mistake to make."

The blue eye fixed me with burning contempt.

"It was not," the boy replied. "And so mistake is either too feeble a word, or entirely mistaken."

"I was speaking," I replied, "of the mistake I made. I came in here, you see, expecting you to be one of Hanno's."

The Saint of Swords come again, my mind whispered. *Necessity that bleeds the grip, the hard deed that keeps the night at bay*. The bottom of my staff whispered against the stone as I limped forward and the young Named tensed, though truth be told he'd be

too exhausted to put up a fight if taking his life was my intent. Instead, leaning against the yew I knelt in front of him – and, miracles of miracles, the pain in my leg was barely a whisper. Meeting the mismatched gaze, the clouded eye and burning blue, I reached out and gently tipped up his chin.

“My mistake,” I quietly repeated. “No, from the beginning you were one of mine.”

The gentleness, I thought, was what unmade him. A shiver went through his frame, turning into a tortured convulsion and only then a ragged sob tore its way out of his throat.

“I’m a monster,” the boy wept. “Gods forgive, oh Gods forgive me.”

My hand went down to his shoulder, comforting.

“Of course you are,” I gently said. “That’s what makes you one of mine. We’re the wicked ones, you see.”

“I don’t want to be wicked,” he rasped. “I just- I just couldn’t...”

“We never can,” I softly told him. “That’s how we end up wicked, I think. Because we can’t stand to be good, if it also means we must *let it go*.”

“I didn’t want to kill them,” the boy whispered, “but what else could I do? If I’d had the Light, the real one, I could have healed them. Helped them. Instead...”

I drew back my hand and leaned on the yew I’d received in the depths of Liesse, born anew under twilit sky. I rose, the light behind me drawing the eye to the snaking crimson blood of the dead priest on painted stone. *You are a child*, I thought.

“That is not the gift you were given,” I said.

“My gift is death,” he spat.

“Aye,” I said. “So it is. Either accept that truth or die under the weight of your utter inconsequence.”

The boy-Named flinched. He had, perhaps, expected comfort. Maybe a better woman would have offered it.

“The corpses smouldering outside were good, as much as most people are ever good,” I said. “What do you think sets you apart from them?”

“Death,” he said.

"Will," I corrected. "The belief, deep down, that you know what is right and you'll see it done."

He hesitated.

"It is the mark of Named," I said. "And why, even now, some part of you wonders – wasn't I *right*? Didn't it *need* to be done?"

"Did it?" the boy asked, prayed, pleaded.

You are a child, I thought once more, almost ashamed.

"What's your Name?" I asked.

"I am Tan- no, that is not the sort of name you meant at all, is it?" the boy whispered.

His fingers clenched.

"I am the Scorched Apostate," the boy said.

I nodded in approval.

"Come along, then," I said. "You have much to learn, and this war won't fight itself."

I did not wait for an answer, simply turning around and limping away without once looking back. One, two, three heartbeats: the Scorched Apostate dragged himself up to his feet and followed behind me, quickening his steps to catch up. *You are a child*, I thought once more. *But we're in the pit, now, and if Keter is to fall then this is the least of the horrors I'll need to stomach.*

We left the House of Light to its dead priest.

Neither of us looked back.

Chapter 3: Standard

"The tragedy of our time, of every time, is that while there is power in knowledge there can be just as much in ignorance."

– First Princess Eugénie of Lange

I watched the Scorched Apostate sit in silence, face solemn, as the two healers from the House Insurgent finished seeing to the wound on his leg and moved to the larger task of his heavy burns. I'd had him brought away from where the last four survivors of the nameless village were being looked at by another priest. Grandmaster Talbot spoke with the priestess in question – a fair-haired Liessen girl in her late twenties – before trudging his way to me through boggy grounds. With his helmet removed, Brandon Talbot's neatness was even more apparent than usual, all the more glaring for the contrast with his worn armour. He sketched a bow

and I flicked an impatient hand to tell him to cut it out. I'd made my peace with a lot of the formalities having put on a fancy hat meant for me, but they had no place out in the field.

"My queen," the knight said. "Sister Cecily says the survivors are physically healthy and without disease."

If the boy was right about the seeded plague and his eyes were sharp as I suspected they were, he might have spared them for that very reason. Or it might be he'd simply missed them before exhaustion caught up with him and he ended up retreating to the temple.

"Send a rider ahead to Lord Adjutant, informing him he is prepare a quarantined tent for them," I ordered. "Then have them sent back on some of your spare mounts, under escort."

"By your will, Your Majesty," he said, then hesitated. "Though it is unlikely they will know how to ride."

"Tie them on, if need be," I flatly said. "They're in no state to walk and I'll not have them rubbing elbows with this one."

The last two words were married to a jerky nod of the head towards the young villain I'd found.

"Agreed," Grandmaster Talbot said, tone heavy with distaste. "I'll see to it."

I let him handle the arrangements, gaze lingering on the Named. Two healers from the House Insurgent spent thirty heartbeats trying to heal the burns, but to no avail. There was less bleeding beneath the blackened skin, but no other difference to speak of. The charred ruin that'd been made of the Scorched Apostate's face was not something Light or sorcery would be able mend, I suspected. I limped up to the three of them, the two priests ending their attempts as I approached and falling into deep bows. The House Insurgent's priests always seemed to be trying to make up for the my significantly more nuanced relationship with the House Constant by open displays of esteem and allegiance, which I still wasn't quite sure how to deal with. Over my years of ruling Callow I'd had good working relationships with a few brothers and sisters of the House, but genuine *deference* from people sworn to Above was still something I struggled with.

"A gallant effort," I said, "but those are beyond Light's ability to mend."

The boy's eyes betrayed no disappointment at my words, only a sort of cynical satisfaction. He'd not believed for a moment he'd be freed from the burns.

"I can only apologize our failure," the older of the priests said, and seemed intent to continue along that line until I briskly shook my head.

"There is no need for that. It is a natural thing, and not unknown to me," I said. "I once had such a scar as well."

A long red cut that went all the way across my chest, where the Lone Swordsman had gutted me before leaving me to die.

"Once?" the boy spoke up, picking up on the implication. "No longer?"

"It took a death, but I was rid of it," I agreed. "But you're rather too young to be thinking of trifling with angels."

It'd taken snatching a resurrection from Contrition to wipe the scar away, and I was not truly certain it'd been the angelic touch and not the victory before it that'd actually done the trick there. I'd ask Tariq to have a look at the boy regardless, just in case Mercy might feel like living up to the virtue it claimed, but his Name seemed like it might just resist the change tooth and nail: he wasn't called the *Lightly Singed Apostate*.

"Thank you," I told the priests. "I would speak with him alone, if you don't mind."

Deep bows once more, and murmurs of agreement.

"Congratulations," I told the Scorched Apostate. "You are Named, and the first of this spring to be brought into a treaty backed by almost every crown on Calernia."

He blinked with his blue eye, uncomprehending.

"There's a proper formal name for it," I idly continued, "but most of us call it the Truce and the Terms."

"A treaty about what?" the boy asked.

"Not hanging boys like you when we find them," I said.

"I'm not a boy," the boy insisted. "I'm fourteen."

I did not betray my surprise. The burns had made it hard to tell his age and he was tall for a boy of fourteen. Especially a peasant one. *Fourteen*, I thought with muted grief, *and already hundreds of corpses to your name*. There were some among the Named he'd be rubbing elbows with that would be impressed by this. They wouldn't even all be villains.

"That's the part that trips you up?" I still asked, dimly amused. "Not the hanging, being called a boy?"

"You can call me Tancred instead," the young villain said. "Or Scorched."

I did not quite have the heart to tell him no one would ever call him the latter save as mockery, though I suspected even Archer would feel a little bad about making sport of someone so painfully earnest.

"Tancred," I said, a half-hearted concession. "You are Named, and though there will be an investigation about what took place in this nameless village—"

"Marserac," the boy interrupted, tone heavy. "It is called Marserac."

I forced myself not to look at the burning wrecks in the distance behind us. Only a handful of far-flung houses would survive of what *had* been called Marserac.

"Do not interrupt me again," I said, tone calm but firm.

Tancred bit the sole part of his lip that was not a blackened ruin, looking like I'd slapped him. I made my heart ache, but it needed to be done. I was not his mother or his friend: I was his patroness, and perhaps on occasion I'd be his teacher. Boundaries needed to be set from the very beginning.

"As the Scorched Apostate, you have been approached by one of the Grand Alliance's high officers and extended the chance to sign and abide by the Truce and Terms," I said. "Though what took place in Marserac will be investigated by my people, and your claim of a seeded plague looked into, even if you are mistaken in that claim you'll still fall under the blanket amnesty that comes with agreeing to abide by the treaty."

Tancred's sole blue eye burned with indignation and he looked about to boil over, but he kept his tongue. My lips quirked in approval. Good. If he could master himself on this day, of all days, then he had some promise.

"Speak," I said.

"That's *rotten*," the Scorched Apostate burst out before I'd even finished the word. "That I'd still get away with it if I'd just—"

He shivered, and I could almost see his mind shying away from fully looking at what it was he'd done today. There would be a need to nip that habit in the bud — failing to recognize what you were was a dangerous thing, for a villain — but even now I still had enough mercy in me to leave that for another day.

"— if it'd just been slaughter for slaughter's sake," Tancred forced out, "murder for sport. That's *rotten*."

The boy hesitated.

"Sir," he hesitantly tacked on, half as a question.

"That'll do," I said. "And it's not a pretty thing, you're not wrong about that. The business of survival never is."

The indignation had yet to abate, so I flicked out a hand in permission for him to speak once more.

"They say we're winning the war, though," the Apostate said. "Last summer the Black Queen and the Iron Prince almost took back the capital in Hainaut, and since then the attack midwinter was beaten back. Why does there need to be an amnesty for villains?"

"For heroes as well," I plainly said. "We've no sole claim on bloody swords."

It was somewhat refreshing not to have been recognized, I found, but this perception that we'd achieved anything but a bloody stalemate against the Dead King – the ruling champion of wars of attrition – needed to be put to rest. This summer we might just begin turning the tide, Gods willing or out of my damned way, but the sole front that could be said to have truly gained victories until now was the Lycaonese one. Those hard fuckers up in Twilight's Pass were making all of us proud.

"There is a truce, Tancred, because that first summer offensive in Hainaut nearly lost us the war," I said, tone serious.

"Because the midwinter attacks would have broken through the defensive line if the Fortunate Fool hadn't sacrificed himself to take out the Lord of Ghouls, or if the Witch of the Woods hadn't flattened one of our own fortresses with two thousand of our soldiers still in it. Because we need every Named, even the worst of them, and each one that hides from us out fear might end up raised into the Dead King's ranks instead if he gets his hands on them."

The young villain looked at me as if he'd never seen me before. My assessment had been stark, true, but I'd wager that was not the reason: I was not speaking as an officer would, but as someone who had a seat at the kind of table where there were precious few warranting one.

"So crimes committed before joining the treaty are granted amnesty, no matter how foul," I said. "Heroes and villains are to observe the peace of the Truce with each other until Keter falls, no matter past enmities. Should conflicts arise, or accusations need to be made about breaches of the Truce, they are to be brought to their representative under the Terms."

I nodded at his inquisitive look, granting leave to speak. Indignation had gutted out, looked like, as it tended to when it

was cast against the abstract instead of something you could see or hear. Curiosity was more tempting a mistress than arguing with me, at least for now.

"And who are they?" the Scorched Apostate asked.

"The White Knight, for heroes," I said. "The Black Queen, for villains. Those who claim to be neither can choose who they would appeal to. A band was assembled under the Archer that has a degree of legal authority as well, but they are wanderers."

Tancred slowly nodded, seemingly not unfamiliar with the Name. Indrani's reputation had made it this far north, then. She'd be pleased to hear it, vain creature that she was.

"Under the Terms are also set out obligations that must be fulfilled to remain protected by the Truce," I continued. "I'll let you paw through the lot of them later – actually, can you read?"

Tancred looked away, then shook his head.

"Something else to see to, then," I said. "They'll be read to you in detail by a sworn representative until you can read them yourself. The crux of them is simple: follow the laws of the land and serve in the war against the Dead King. If there are lesser grievances or breaches, punishment will be meted out by your representative under the Terms."

Quite a few of the heroes had howled at that last detail, a few like the Blade of Mercy and the Blessed Artificer even threatening to walk if it was upheld, but with both the White Knight and the Grey Pilgrim in my corner we'd had the clout to ram it through. Not that Tariq hadn't had his reservations, but we were all aware that precious few villains would even consider Truce if joining it meant they were under heroic jurisdiction. On my side of the deal the trouble had been making it clear to the Named that I was actually serious about enforcing the Terms. The Pilfering Dicer hadn't really believed me, and so Hakram had held out his hand on a stump as I hacked a finger off as chastisement. There'd been another sort of challenge too, unsurprisingly: two other villains had lost little time before trying to take my place as representative by force of arms.

The Barrow Sword had been pleasantly straightforward about it, telling me outright he intended to use me as a stepping stone to rise high enough he could bargain with the Dominion to be named as the founder of a line of Blood. He'd just as straightforwardly submitted when I'd struck him hard enough with Night to blast him through two carts and a palisade. We'd had drinks after, and while he was a ruthless bastard he was also halfway decent company if you didn't get him started on the Silent Slayer's line. The Red Reaver had not been so respectable in his ambition.

He'd tried to slit my throat in my sleep only to be caught by Indrani while trying to slip through my tent's wards, and after that I'd... made an example. A warning to anyone else who might have similar ambition and lack of sense. There had not been a challenge since, though I'd no doubt that the longer this war lasted the more I'd end up having to face.

"I will fight the Hidden Horror," the Scorched Apostate solemnly said, "on that you have my oath. I will march north and face the dead."

"You'll be headed to the Belfry for a few months, Tancred, unless there's a pressing need for your talents," I drily told him.

While the smouldering remnants of Marserac behind us were testament to the power the young villain was capable of wielding, I had no intention of sending a mage so spectacularly untaught straight into the nightmare of the northern defensive line. That was a recipe for either losing a company to an uncontrolled blaze or serving up Keter a fresh Revenant. Named lost a great deal of power after the Dead King got to them, and some aspects Neshamah either could not or would not maintain in death, but a Revenant spellcaster with this much of a bite to him would be a rough ride to deal with even if he ended up having only one trick.

"The Belfry, sir?" the boy hesitantly asked.

"This isn't the kind of war that can be won with boots on the ground alone, Tancred," I said. "The Grand Alliance understood that well before it began mobilizing. There would be a need for fresh sorceries, for unprecedented warding schemes and artefacts. A safe haven would have to be built for those scholars who would study the Hidden Horror's tricks and learn how to unmake them, too, one beyond his reach. And so the Arsenal was ordered raised."

I let a moment pass, gauging how much I should truly say. There'd been some of us, at the beginning, who'd argued that the Arsenal's existence should be kept a secret. Princess Rozala had been one of the more ardent partisans of that belief, arguing that against Keter the best defence was secrecy, and the Grey Pilgrim had backed her – which meant the Blood had as well. In private with me, Tariq had argued that by keeping the Arsenal secret now we would later get the benefit of revealing it when tipping a pivot one way or another, but I'd been unconvinced then and I was unconvinced now. As it happened Hasenbach and I had, for once, been in complete and utter agreement. Even if one was willing to write off the effects on morale that knowing such a place existed would have on the rank and file of the Grand Alliance, which neither of us was, the fact remained that practically speaking keeping it secret would be near impossible.

Too many people would be involved in its construction and its upkeep. Whether it be building the towers and laboratories, bringing in food by cart or even something as simple as making the beds in the rooms there would be a need for workers and servants to handle the labour. That we'd gathered some of the finest magical minds in Procer, Callow and Levant before going further by bringing in scholars, priests and artisans meant that numbers alone would make disappearances glaringly obvious anyway. And it wasn't like the Dead King wasn't going to expect us to have such a facility. No, better to lay false trails by the dozen and keep the *location* secret rather than attempt the improbable outcome of utter secrecy.

"There are two societies within it, the Workshop and the Belfry," I continued. "The Workshop concerns itself with the making of artefacts, armaments and alchemies. The Belfry's mandate is broader in scope: study of the Dead King's creatures, war magic and warding, experimental research."

I let a beat pass so the details could sink in. The part that mattered most I'd consciously split from the rest.

"The Belfry also concerns itself with teaching mages," I told the boy.

It'd been a struggle to pull away Masego from his attempts to establish his proof of concept for Quartered Seasons and the other half dozen projects he'd picked up, but the results had been well worth the hassle: he'd trained up a few talented Proceran practitioners to what he called 'acceptable' scrying ritual standards, which was maybe two decades ahead of what anyone west of the Whitecaps had previously been capable of. That cadre now served as permanent teachers for the hedge talents the First Prince was sifting through Procer for, sent in by bands of twenty for teaching. The scrying network for the Grand Alliance was arguably the largest and widest-reaching on the continent at the moment, if likely still inferior in quality and reliability to Praes'. Communications grew harder the closer we were to active warfare against Keter, too, now that Neshamah had begun using disruptive rituals.

Adjusting our rituals so that the disruptions wouldn't affect them was exactly the kind of puzzle the Belfry had been assembled to solve, though, so we'd see how long that lasted.

Getting a training camp running for war magic had been a great deal less successful, unfortunately. Even after lowering the bar of used sorcery to the standard of the Legions of Terror we'd proved incapable of reliably training up mages in that manner. We were running thin on instructors, true, but at the end of the day the unpleasant truth was that there was simply a limited amount of people in Procer with a Gift that was strong enough to be useful for war. The total number of mages living in the

Principate was likely higher than that in the Empire, by simple dint of population, but the *quality* of those talents was the trouble. Massed sorcery remained beyond our grasp for now, though at least training up a handful ritual cadres had proved a workable alternative. Standardization remained the largest issue there, since no two cadres were capable of doing the same things and there was only haphazard overlap.

"Are you not going to teach me?" the boy quietly asked.

His face was hard to read, which I supposed was a feeble silver lining to the scorching of his face. His voice, though, his stance? He was fourteen and, Named or not, he'd seen precious little of the world. He might as well be an open book to me.

"There are things you'll learn from me," I said. "Magic, however, isn't one of them. I don't have the Gift. I do happen to be acquainted with a few of the finest practitioners of it alive, though, so rustling up a good tutor for you shouldn't be all that difficult."

Who to send him to would be something to consider. Masego's interest in teaching could best be described as passing, though he was a rather able tutor when talked into it. Hierophant also had so much on his plate the meal could feed two and he'd lost the ability to practice magic. Roland might be a better fit, anyway, given that his tendency to be a generalist meant he always had common grounds with pupils. The Rogue Sorcerer was a hero, though, and the way he ended up saddled with the work that no one else was particularly good at meant his days were nearly as filled as Masego's. The Hunted Magician owed Indrani a favour which I might be able to call in for this, but the Proceran villain was an enchanter for the Workshop and just... generally unpleasant. I'd rather the Scorched Apostate be taught by a Named mage instead of a Nameless one, but we'd have to see.

"But I will be sent to this Belfry," Tancred said, hesitant.

"Not alone," I replied, taking a measure of pity on him. "I'm to head south myself before long, and I meant to pass through the Arsenal. I'll be accompanying you there, at least."

Indrani had been riding me about physically setting foot at the Arsenal for a few months now, though until today I'd been on the fence about taking the detour there after the council. This settled it, though, since I'd want to settle the boy comfortably under someone able to teach him before moving on. Archer wasn't wrong, either, when she said that it was sloppy of me to have never met so many Named on our side, including villains I represented under the Terms. How many were there nowadays, between the Workshop and the Belfry? Ten, twelve? Less than half of that were of mine, since it was harder to find villains willing to play nice with others than heroes, but even getting a

good look at the currents of the place might not be a bad idea. If we lost the Arsenal, the war would begin a death spiral downwards in a matter of months: best to make sure it wouldn't shatter itself from within.

"Good," the Scorched Apostate said, perking up. "I have-"

I wasn't riding Zombie this time so her discomfort could not serve as warning for the closeness of the Beastmaster, but the old trick I'd once taught Vivienne still worked. Someone had been looking at me intently, too intently. It'd been an attempt to sneak up on me, I decided, and there were few who'd attempt that against me in broad daylight.

"Beastmaster," I interrupted, "have you grown shy? Come out properly, introduce yourself."

The man bedecked in furs and leather let out a grunt and circled away from my back, only then catching Tancred's notice. Only one hawk was still on his shoulder.

"Your pet witch sent word," Beastmaster said. "She makes haste, as you ordered."

"Have you called her that to her face?" I asked, morbidly curious.

I almost hoped he hadn't, just so he might try it before me: it'd been too long since I'd seen Akua flay someone alive with her tongue. The Beastmaster spat to the side.

"Better to embrace vipers than speak with witches," the Named dismissively said.

So, I thought amusedly, *you've most definitely called her that to her face and the predictable ensued*. Slow learner, was he? Not that he'd been the first. It never ceased to amaze me that some people somehow ended up thinking *Akua Sahelian* would be an easy prey for barbs or bluster just because she did not have a Name while they did. It was like sticking your hand in a wolf's maw and expecting the teeth not to wound because they weren't a bear's.

"That hawk," Tancred said. "I've seen it before."

"She saw you," Beastmaster replied.

Since apparently Ranger's education in Refuge had not extended to basic courtesies – and Gods, I'd meant that as a jab but now that I *thought* about it – I saw to the introductions myself.

"Tancred, this is the Beastmaster," I said. "He's a former pupil of the Lady of the Lake, and now a mercenary in the service of the Grand Alliance."

Paid not in coin, which I would almost have preferred. The Beastmaster had instead bargained for certain rights and permissions, as well as guides to be provided to show him paths to ancient places in the depths of Brocelian Forest. Coin meant little to the Named of Refuge, used as they were to barter instead, and the relative modesty of the man's demands meant he'd gotten near everything he'd asked for. He'd simply been too useful an asset to be carelessly tossed aside, and even with Refuge having effectively collapsed it wasn't like he'd not had other places to go. The fighting in the Free Cities was far from over, despite General Basilia's streak of victories.

"Greetings," Tancred said, though he was frowning.

"Beastmaster, this is the Scorched Apostate," I said. "He has agreed to abide by the Truce and the Terms."

The older Named looked the younger up and down, seeing no longer the villain who'd caused the blaze in the distance but a boy a fourteen with most his face lost to burns and clothes that were well on their way to being rags. He was visibly unimpressed.

"Another one plucked out of the mud?" Beastmaster said with a hard bark of laughter. "At least this one has fight in him."

"Not half an hour ago," I mildly reminded him, "you were wary of him. Did you boldness perhaps travel by foot, to be arriving so late after the rest of you?"

His face darkened. I met his gaze squarely. Like Archer in the early days, he'd take any attempt at diplomacy as weakness and continue to push his luck. But he wasn't Indrani, and I was not a Squire well out of her depth. I'd killed harder men than him and done it with a great deal less power than I could now call on. Confident in his strength as he might be, he'd be looking at the trail of corpses left in my wake and be forced to admit that were Named among the lot that would have butchered him without batting an eye. And so he backed down, or at least as close to that as his character could afford to let him.

"There is nothing left to hunt," the Beastmaster said. "I take my leave of you."

I could sting him further, but there would be no point to it save passing pleasure. Not that I'd let the retreat pass entirely without comment, lest he take that as relief on my part.

"By all means," I replied. "The conversation was getting stale."

Beastmaster's lips thinned, but he strode away without speaking any further. I glanced at Tancred, who'd been following all of it with wide eyes and now was looking at me a little guiltily.

"I'm sorry," the Scorched Apostate said. "I didn't mean to get you in trouble."

"Trouble?" I echoed.

"Won't he complain to the Black Queen?" the boy asked. "You've made an enemy of a powerful Named on my behalf."

He seemed genuinely worried, which was a little touching.

"You seem to have misunderstood the nature of my relationship with him," I said, smoothing away any trace of my amusement.

Tancred looked appalled, and a little sickened.

"I am sorry, sir," he said. "I did not mean to insult your lover."

I choked. Beastmaster, of all men? Gods, I'd rather sleep with the Mirror Knight. The man might be an insufferable prick, but at least he bathed regularly.

"He's not my lover, he's my *subordinate*," I said.

In the boy's defence, he seemed pretty mortified by the mistake. His embarrassment passed soon enough, though, and left behind only the latest hint in a series of them that'd been growing the longer we spoke.

"Those priests and horsemen," the young villain said. "They were Callowan. And yet they bowed to you."

"So they did," I agreed.

My hand reached within my cloak to extricate the long dragonbone pipe Masego had gifted me so many years ago, then producing a satchel of Orense bitterleaf from another pocket. Sadly the bitterleaf enough had come to replace wakeleaf as my vice of choice as it was much easier to get your hands on this far north. The smoke was heavier than wakeleaf's, and it was often mixed with sweeter herbs to take the edge of the sourness off, but it scratched the itch well enough when stuffed in a pipe.

"You implied you were a high officer of the Grand Alliance," the Scorched Apostate continued. "But that's not all you are, is it?"

I passed my palm over the pipe, flames flickering within through a twist of the Night, and pulled at the mouth a few times before spewing out a steam of smoke.

"Who are you?" Tancred asked.

"The Firstborn named me Losara, the Queen of Lost and Found," I lazily replied. "To the Wasteland I was the Squire, the Carrion

Lord's sole apprentice. The fae knew me by many names, though the last I ever bore was that of Sovereign of Moonless Nights. On this side of the Whitecaps, though? It's a simple name I am known by."

"The Black Queen," the boy whispered hoarsely. "The leader of the Woe."

"Aye," I said, with a crooked smile. "And now let's find you some boots, because I refuse to keep wincing every time I look at your shoes."

Chapter 4: Shadowed

"By my own hand I have made my enemies, and so own them just as a craftsman owns his craft."

– Dread Emperor Nihilis I, the Tanner

Dusk was shyly peeking over the horizon when Akua Sahelian arrived.

Tancred's exhaustion had caught up to him before long, and he now lay curled under a blanket on the closest thing to dry land we'd been able to find: a large flat stone. The boy was resting his head against a rolled-up horse blanket, too-large boots dangling out of the covers, and drooling into the coarse cloth. He was dreaming, though from way he sometimes clenched his teeth it must have been a nightmare. Hardly a surprise, after the storm of fire and death he'd unleashed on Marserac: it would take a colder soul than this one possessed to sleep restfully after that kind of butchery. I tore away my gaze from the boy, knowing that if stared any longer I'd find it more difficult to resist soothing his sleep. I'd always had a hard time picking my attachments, and though that'd saved my life more than once in the past it would not always remain that way. Though I was only a claimant, even after two years in the crucible, it could not be denied I was once more on the path to being Named.

That meant an apprentice – a real apprentice, not an occasional pupil or a child under patronage – might just be the first step on the road to an early grave. There were ways around it, at least. The Lady of the Lake was the example to emulate there, for once. Ranger had been a teacher for decades in Refuge without ever falling to that peril. In my more charitable moments I wondered if the way she'd been so harsh with all she taught was not in that sense a way of preserving her own life, but that charity was ever passing. Regardless, there were parts of her methods worth emulating. Teaching many students, teaching a general method more than passing one's own signature talents, not allowing yourself to be drawn into the stories of one's pupils. All were rules to consider when seeing to the youngest villains in my charge, and perhaps even when Cardinal itself would be

raised. Much as I intended to be sitting on the council arbitrating the Liesse Accords instead of teaching, I might be moved to dabble on occasion. It might prove necessary, should we be thin on the ground for teachers in the early years.

Regardless, I must step carefully until I grasped the nature of the Name I was moving towards. I had opponents still out there that would slit my throat through even the slightest of missteps. One in particular had been most noticeable by her absence, though I was not so foolish as to believe that just because I'd not heard of the Wandering Bard she'd not been busy weaving her nets. But we were busy too, and though the Dead King was our enemy I'd not forgotten his parting short at the Peace of Salia. *There is a place in the heart of Levant*, the Hidden Horror had told us, *where the first pilgrim of grey slew many men*. And there, he'd claimed, there would be a secret buried that would tell us how Kairos Theodosian had saved all our lives. The Dead King had claimed that Tariq would know of the place, and that'd proved true enough: it was valley in the depths of southern Levant known as the Verdant Hollow. Finding the truths buried there had not been anywhere as simple as the King of Death had implied, though.

For one, the White Knight's aspect could not see into what had taken place within the bounds of the valley during the first Grey Pilgrim's life. It had not stopped us following the thread, but it'd certainly slowed us down. *Soon, though*, I thought. Vivienne's reports was clear about that. With Tariq's influence backing us we'd been able to bargain with the Holy Seljun for access to the secret records of the Isbili and using those another trail had been found. I'd winced at the number and calibre of Named we'd had to send to follow it, but the band of five under the Painted Knife had found success in the form of a secret they'd refused to entrust to scrying rituals. A knot of hope and fear had laid nest in my stomach ever since I'd read the report. The truth they were bringing north would not be a gentle one. Yet the grim cast of my thoughts was dismissed by the beat of wings on the wind. I turned, having felt her presence nearing in the Night long before either ear or eye afforded the same, and felt the same clench of the heart I always did when I saw the span of those black wings on the wind.

Akua had taken to embracing the changeable nature that her strange half-life lent her – in part because emphasizing her unearthly nature helped my reputation, making her seem more as a bound spirit than the Doom of Liesse now keeping my council – so it'd been expected that she would start shapechanging for reasons both practical and entirely dramatic. I'd even expected that it came to choosing a shape that could fly she would not settle for a paler imitation of Sve Noc. Yet I'd expected some mimicry of a Wasteland legend, like the rain-birds the Taghreb claimed the Miezens had hunted to extinction or the red-feathered ibis whose croaks at dusk were said to be prophetic by Soninke myths. What

she had chosen, instead, was a black swan. Swans were not native to the Wasteland: they were Callowan beasts, most known to nest in the south. Liesse had been called the City of Swans, once upon a time. That the woman who'd once been the Doom of Liesse would take the shape of an ebony-black swan was a gesture of many nuances, and one I still had difficulty parsing.

The few knights still with me, no more than a score, turned hard gazes towards the nearing bird almost to the last. The revelation that the Advisor Kivule was in truth the Doom of Liesse bound to my service had been ill-received, though it'd been a strangely fascinating exercise to see why and by who. The House Insurgent had in fact praised my efforts to redeem the former Diabolist in their sermons, nearly sidestepping the issue that we were both villains of disputable retirement, and the eastern parts of my armies had been largely indifferent. The Order of the Broken Bells, and indeed most Callowan highborn among my armies, had not been so blithe in their indifference. I'd had petitions to allow her to stand trial before either a military tribunal or a noble one that'd gotten increasingly pressing as time went on, and even my blunt reply that I still had a use of Akua had not been enough to put the matter to rest. It was a black mark on my record for a lot of my countrymen, and if not for the constant pressure of Keter to the north I suspected the backlash would have been a lot worse.

As it was, there'd still been desertions. Not many, but given how few of those I'd suffered since the first campaign of the Fifteenth it had stung in ways that were hard to explain. That was a candle to the bonfire that'd been the reaction back in Callow, though. Vivienne had appointed Duchess Kegan Iarsmai of Daoine to the office of Governess-General of Callow before leaving the kingdom for the Proceran campaign which had been, and in many ways still was, good sense. The Duchess' armies were the largest military force left in Callow, she had the clout and pedigree to keep the northern nobles in line and most of all there was absolutely no doubt that Kegan Iarsmai would reply to secret offers from the Tower by steel and public hangings. Duchess Kegan was also the ruler of the Deoraithe, whose ancestral spirits had been stolen and used as a glorified fuel for the doomsday fortress at the heart of Akua's Folly. The news that I now kept the eponymous Akua in my service, even as a shade, had... not been well received.

What few gains in trust I'd made with Daoine had gone the way of thin air, and there was now little doubt that when the war with Keter was settled Duchess Kegan would exercise the right I'd promised her when I'd first bargained for her aid: namely, that the freshly-elevated Grand Duchy of Daoine would be allowed to secede from the Kingdom of Callow while remaining a military ally and suffering no loss of trading rights or privileges with the kingdom. At least the northern baronies hadn't agitated over it

beyond some expected opportunistic posturing: they'd least felt the taste of both the Praesi occupation and Akua's span of folly, so truth be told they'd had little to agitate *with*. And that was only the reaction of nobles, who as the Hierarch had once reminded me were but a few to the many. Though news travelled slow and the shifting nature of rumours gave the hydra a hundred different heads, my reputation had taken a hit back home as well.

A lot of my appeal to the people as a ruler, Hakram had noted in that clear-eyed way of his, had come from how harshly I'd dealt with the Folly and the fae incursions. Akua's survival was a complication in what had had previously been a straightforward story, and people rarely took well to such added twists and turns. There'd not been riots, at least, but there'd been open unrest in the growing southern towns. Many of the former refugees settled there had lost kin in Liesse, and having had my name associated with years of food and shelter in the wake of the ravaging of the south had only helped quell the tensions so much. The House Constant had stayed aloof, as if usually did when it came to worldly affairs, but the Jacks had made it clear that most of the small factions that'd been leaning the way of the House Insurgent now had second thoughts. No, the revelation had cost me a great deal of trust that I would likely never regain: a decade of good rule might see this turn into nothing but a bump in the road, but I didn't have a decade of rule ahead of me.

I fully intended to abdicate in the wake of the war against Keter, so at this point it was more important to gild Vivienne's reputation than glue back a few lost feathers onto mine. As a silver lining that'd proved almost ludicrously easy. Before my thoughts could wander down that rabbit hole, though, elegant talons touched the ground beneath open wings and darkness shifted from swan to woman. Akua had perfected the process: it looked like she was rising from a kneeling position, sweeping up gracefully. Her first attempts, Archer assured me, had looked a lot more like a kid failing at a pirouette. The Doom of Liesse rose to her full height, skirts sweeping around her, and tastefully curtsied.

"My queen," Akua greeted me.

The hard eyes of my knights remained on her back and, I almost imagined, on mine. It made me feel restless, and as it happened I had decent reason to indulge the urge to move: I'd sent for Akua because I needed answers about what had taken place in Marserac, and the village in question was ahead.

"Walk with me," I said.

She did, without missing a beat. We'd had these walks often enough, over the last two years, that it felt like a natural thing for her to fall perfectly in step with my limp. There was a

lot that felt natural these days about having her at my side, which I needed no warning to know was a dangerous thing.

"You heard about what happened here," I said, brusquely gesturing towards the burning village.

Unlike me, whose limp was forcing to slog through the wet grounds inelegantly, she was not dipping in so much as a toe. I could probably achieve the same thing by calling on the Night, but she needed not such thing – where once her body had been a soul given flesh by Winter, she now used the power of Sve Noc for the same effect. She didn't need to draw on Night, per se, as she was *made* of Night – changing the properties of her physical shell was child's play to her, like playing with clay.

"I did," Akua acknowledged. "And from the looks of that sleeping boy under a Callowan blanket, you have gathered another stray to your hearth."

"The Scorched Apostate," I said.

She let out a sigh of sympathy.

"An unfortunate Name in many ways," Akua said. "Those marks will not be easily shed even should he stay at your feet."

"He won't, not for long," I said. "He's headed for the Belfry."

"Mage?" she inferred, interest rising. "He does not have the look of one from a wealthy household."

"Talent is not distributed according to land holdings," I grunted back.

The shade glanced at me, seemingly amused. Akua Sahelian was a lovely sight in any light I would care to name, even more so now that she had discarded the veils she had worn as 'Advisor Kivule', but I'd grown partial to the way she looked under spreading twilight. Shapely as she was – tall and full-breasted yet slender, an almost hourglass shape I'd believed belonged only in stories before first witnessing the unearthly beauty of Wasteland highborn with my own eyes – there was no time of the day that would do her figure disservice, much less in the tight and high-waisted dress of black and scarlet she'd chosen to wear, but twilight always lent her a certain... It was the golden eyes, I thought, and the sharp bones of her face. Under dusk's cast she looked as gorgeous and terrible as the old tales had promised the fae would be. She felt me stare, no doubt, but said nothing of it. It wouldn't be the first time, nor would it be the last.

"Magic is not an inexpensive art to train in, heart of my heart," she said. "I cast not unkind auspice on the boy's talent, but

merely express surprise that one with such a powerful Gift did not burn themselves out long before they could become Named."

I wasn't ignorant of the dangers of having a powerful magical talent without being taught, of course. The War Collage had gone into some detail about it, and Black had made certain I read the highborn screeds about the matter like *Sorcerous' Bequest* and *The Burden of Privilege*. Praesi highborn often used the death rates as a justification for the ways High Seats plucked out young mages from their families for training and servitude. Mind you, Black had wanted to replace that with Legion schooling and at least one mandatory term of service in the ranks – he'd be much more interested in breaking the grip of the High Seats over the loyalty of the finest mages in Praes than in ensuring the freedom of practitioners. Knowing him he'd have no issue with said freedom either should it come as a consequence of his policies, though.

"He's got only the one trick, as far as I can tell," I reluctantly conceded. "And it's some sort of imitation of what Light can do in a fight."

"A limited repertoire would help," Akua confirmed. "Quite a few untaught mages end up using similar wild spells – the easiest of conjurations and illusions – regardless of where they are born with no ill effect. It is lack of control married to strong emotion that is the most common killer for hedge practitioners, but an intense obsession on a single crude formula would... restrain this danger."

She paused, afterwards.

"An imitation of the Light," she repeated, tone ambiguous. "How very Proceran."

It did not sound like a compliment, nor was it meant to be one. The distaste was not directed at Tancred, though.

"Not all peoples in the world hold magic as the gift of all gifts," I reminded her.

My own had a complicated relationship with sorcery, for one. It was a rare city in Callow that was not warded, or where a few practitioners could not be hired with coin through the Hedge Guild. Yet magic would never be held in high esteem the way steel or prayer would be, for sorcery was inherently linked to Praes for most of us. Though Wizards of the West and Wise Enchantresses had been a staple of Callowan Names for centuries, none of them had ever held so much as a regent's title – mages were advisors and retainers in Callow, never rulers.

"Nor should they," Akua said. "Though it is a great talent, it is only ever one among the many needed for one to achieve greatness. It is those calling the Gift a curse I hold in contempt."

I didn't disagree, as it happened. The reason why the power of mages had first been curbed in Procer was eminently reasonable: some of the largest wizard guilds had taken to playing kingmaker in the First Prince elections, only to get harshly disciplined when a candidate they'd opposed and even tried to depose consolidated power and began dismantling their guilds. First Prince Louis Merovins had not been a bloodthirsty man, so he'd ended their power by ruinous taxes and starkly limiting guild sizes instead of brutal purges. Yet his successors had simply kept their boots on the throat of Proceran wizardry without ever reconsidering the matter, often with the House of Light's enthusiastic endorsement. Proceran mages couldn't even serve as healers, which I found absurd as magical healing could accomplish things that priestly healing simply could not. Mages were not outright hated, in the Principate, but they did tend to be viewed as keeping to a disreputable trade. I did not think it a coincidence that we'd gotten more villain Named mages out of Procer than we had heroes.

"Things will change," I said. "Hasenbach founded her Order of the Red Lion and they're just too useful to be despised. Now we're gathering and training their mages for war, which ought to gild the record even further. The Principate will have to adjust, after Keter."

A few thousand mages trained in war whose edge had been honed against the Kingdom of the Dead would not meekly bend their neck so the boot could be placed on it again. And I somehow doubted that someone with Cordelia Hasenbach's ruthless streak of practicality would simply release a force like that back into the wilds. Given how badly the higher ranks of the House of Light had blundered when backing the attempted coup against her before the Peace of Salia, I believed the First Prince might even have the pull to force through some much-needed reforms.

"It is in the nature of rot that it is not so easily removed," Akua disagreed.

I simply grunted, unwilling to dispute the point here and now. We had other cats to skin, and we'd wander far off the beaten path. Metaphorically speaking, anyway. In practice we'd reached the outskirts of Marserac and that now familiar half-dug ditch.

"The boy's also got good eyes, like as not," I said. "It's why I sent for you. He claims he found traces of the Dead King's seeded plague in the villagers."

Her brow rose, arching with irritating elegance. When I did the same thing, it just made me look kind of angry.

"A much rarer talent, this, if it is not an aspect," Akua told me. "It implies either an exceptional sensitivity to magic or a physical gift."

I had an inkling it wouldn't be an aspect. Tancred might have had the power before reaching Marserac, but the Name had gotten its weight through the choices he'd made in the village. An aspect beforehand would be putting the cart before the horse.

"Humans don't usually have the latter, as I understand it," I frowned.

One of the pleasures of conversation with Akua, as it happened, was not having to always spell out everything. Sidestepping the notion of it being an aspect was enough for the implied to be understood.

"There are always exceptions," the golden-eyed shade shrugged. "But you are largely correct. It is a gift most often achieved by twining the line with beings so blessed."

A delicate way of saying that the Scorched Apostate was either a one in a hundred thousand birth or there was nonhuman blood running through his veins. Either way there was more to his story than I would have guessed at first glance, and he'd not struck me as a simple soul from the start. Something else to dig into, though that was the kind of matter best tossed into Hakram's lap. Aside from the practical consideration of having left him in charge of serving as my go-between with the Jacks, there was the more esoteric one of avoiding taking too direct an interest in Tancred's past. Unruly curiosity had a way of carrying costs for Named. I looked down at the first corpse I'd encountered earlier, still slumped and scorched.

"Find the plague seeds if there are any to be found," I ordered. "If the Dead King really has such a weapon, we might have a situation on our hands."

It wasn't that I feared there'd be major spread beyond the initial outbreaks: we'd caught this early enough that we ought to be able to contain if not outright smother the attack. Even if one of the refugee camps was turned we'd be able to strike quick enough to prevent a disaster. The Grand Alliance's use of the Twilight Ways meant we marched and deployed significantly quicker than the dead, after all. Yet containment would occupy our armies long enough a summer offensive would become more difficult while simultaneously making us vulnerable to an offensive on the northern defence lines.

"If there is something to be found, I will," Akua replied, calmly certain.

And I believed her, too. Aisha had once warned me about the Sahelians, and this one most of all. They were always trusted, my old friend had told me, by people who ought to know better. *Because they are charming, my queen*, Aisha Bishara had warned me as only a fellow daughter of the Wasteland could. *Because they are beautiful and fascinating and so very useful that certainly it couldn't hurt to bring them into the fold just the once.* And she'd been right, I thought as I watched the woman who'd once been my bitterest enemy kneel by a corpse, weaving strands of Night with her hands. Already I could hardly imagine fighting this war without Akua at my side, and some days it would be untrue to call the amount of trust I put in her *measured*. If this had been achieved as it'd been in the Everdark, where I had been starved of the company of nearly all I trusted, it would have been one thing. But she had done this while the Woe were at my side, and my armies as well.

Even as a shade whose power I could strip with little more than a prayer, Akua Sahelian remained one of the most dangerous people I had ever met.

I sat on the side of the trench, staff propped up between my shoulder and my neck, and brought down the hood of the Mantle of Woe on my head before closing my eyes. Though night was creeping in, I still felt exhausted. I'd not had an empty day, that much was true, but I fancied it to be a different kind of tired. The kind that saw only days like this one writ in the horizon and could not tell how long the world would remain so. I knew, in principle, that we were reaching a turning point: I'd read the same reports as Hasenbach, had the conversation with the Iron Prince a dozen times. Within months we'd reach the peak of the Grand Alliance's fighting capacity, with Procer's industry and manpower fully turned to war and the wealth injected into every nation's war machine by Mercantis and the dwarves finally being brought to bear. This summer would be the time where we went on the offensive, when we took back every Proceran shore and dug in before the assault on Keter itself.

And still I felt so very tired. Neshamah was fighting against us the kind of war where even victory had a taste of defeat. And sometimes, sometimes we just *lost*. So I closed my eyes and let my mind drift, as close to sleeping as I could get without drifting into slumber, and let Akua unfold the leather bag holding the set of tool's she'd use to cut open a corpse and find out if it had been seeded with death or worse yet. I waited perhaps half an hour before I got my answer, eyes fluttering open as I heard the shade rise to her feet. Though her dress had been traded for more practical surgeon's garb – a heavy leather apron over a long-sleeved cloth shirt and fitted trousers – there was no mistaking the blood on her forearms. Or, for that matter, the small stone-like sphere she held in the bloody palm of her hand. Golden eyes met mine, gaze perfectly matched even in the shade of my hood.

"Tell me," I said.

"It is sorcerous in nature," Akua confirmed. "More specifically an enchantment, and though I cannot yet tell you the nature of it – I will need the use of my full workshop to ascertain that for sure – I can already tell you two truths. The first should be evident."

She slightly rotated the sphere, revealing a slightly scorched surface.

"The sorcery that killed this woman damaged the 'seed', and rendered it inert," she said. "Whether it was a delicate enough enchantment structure that damage was enough to disrupt it or that is a property inhering to the sorcery used by the Scorched Apostate, I cannot be sure. If it is the latter, I would urge you to hurry the boy's journey to the Belfry – the implications of that would be far-reaching indeed."

I slowly nodded. If there was a particular sort of sorcery that was damaging to the Dead King's own methods, we needed to get a precise spell formula for it as soon as possible and spread knowledge of it to every single mage in the Grand Alliance to that could learn it.

"The second truth is this 'seed' was aptly named," Akua continued. "It is not meant to permanently remain in this state, but to eventually dissolve and release another enchantment held under the outer shell."

"A plague?" I pressed.

"I cannot yet tell, Catherine," Akua said. "Without a full component kit I cannot even properly gauge how long the shell is supposed to last before dissolving, though from the lack of observable reaction to both silver and cold iron it ought to be more than a lunar month from now."

Cold iron, as I recalled, was a hindrance to weak magics while silver strengthened some and hindered others. The Dead King's necromancies, unfortunately, were not affected by it. Some of his early works likely had been, but Neshamah had not been resting on his laurels all these centuries: his necromantic magic was unlike any other on Calernia.

"Shit," I feelingly said. "It would have killed the boy if he'd ever learned, but I was half-hoping he'd gone mad. We'll need to ring the alarm, Akua. This is the first time he's managed to slip a meaningful force behind our lines since the Lord of Ghouls got offed."

"It is quite possible that Light used in the correct manner will be able to disrupt the enchantments," Akua reassured me. "If

nothing else, that should relieve some of the logistical burden in weeding out the seeded."

I sighed but conceded the point with a half-nod. Priests were already everywhere in the refugee camps, if we figured out a countermeasure using Light we could further limit the casualties.

"Collect all the seeds you can find," I told her. "I want to know everything about those things we can, and spares to send the Belfry's way."

"I will see to it," the golden-eyed shade replied. "Shall I keep them until we return to camp?"

"Do," I said.

There was not much I could do with one, save asking for the opinion of Sve Noc – which I'd rather do when we were safe back in camp anyway, along with my usual nightly communion. Out here in the open, there was no telling what might be lurking. I left Akua to the labour, dragging myself up and limping away. Night had fallen in earnest, and under the starlight sky I headed back towards the boy and my knights. And the priests as well, as I'd forgot. One of them was leaning over Tancred, back hiding what his hands were doing, and I frowned. The Light had already proven unable to help, and though the House Insurgent were loyalists I'd rather not have them putting around a fresh Named with highly destructive inclinations. I hastened my steps, and only when I was within a dozen feet did the priest notice my approach. He withdrew his hand, looking embarrassed. He'd been smoothing away the boy's last tufts of hair. It was the younger of the two Brothers, I recognized that much though I'd never caught either's name.

"Don't," I said, and gestured, for him to move away.

He did with great swiftness and looked ill at ease under my glare.

"I apologize, Your Majesty," he murmured. "It's, only – I have a little brother his age, my queen. He's just a kid, isn't he? Even though he burned the village, he's just a kid."

My expression softened. I'd not noticed earlier, but the priest couldn't have been more than twenty himself. His robes were slightly askew, like they'd not been made for someone with his exact frame, and he moved a little jerkily. Embarrassed and a little intimidated, I felt it safe to assume.

"I don't fault your kindness," I said. "But after a day like this one, waking with a stranger's hand on his brow might be... ill-received."

The priest might have ended up with a black-rimmed hole in his chest, even Tancred had woken up still in the grips of his nightmare. Although, from the looks of it, that had passed. He no longer moved or flinched in his sleep, and his breath was slow. Nearly imperceptible.

"My apologies once more, Your Majesty," the priest repeated.

I waved it away.

"Hold on to the kindness," I said. "It's rarer than rubies, these days. Only add a little caution to it, would you?"

I patted his shoulder as I limped past him, feeling him go still as stone. My score of knights had dismounted, for it'd be absurd for them to remain mounted for hours, and the horses had been tied to a log in the distance. They moved as little as the rest of us, the stillness having caught up to even the animals. Brandon Talbot was long gone, but he'd left one of his officers to lead my escort. Figuring I might as well inform the man we'd be here for some time still, I picked out the man in question – George Redfern, as I recalled. Helm on, the knight was looking up at the moonless sky but even through the steel had little trouble hearing me arrive. My limp was not quiet.

"Your Majesty," the man bowed.

Starlight caught the edge of his plate armour, revealing a carved passage from the Book of All Things. And, to my mild surprise, what looked like dried blood. Talbot had not mentioned the Order fighting today.

"You're wounded," I said.

"The priests have already seen to it, my liege," he reassured me.

I clenched my fingers and unclenched them.

"Your helm, sir," I mildly said.

He stuttered out a surprised apology and hurried in taking off his helmet, revealing a reddish mustachioed face. His gorget was loose around his neck. The priest earlier had been a little off too.

"Fuck," I said. "*Fuck.*"

Night howled through my veins as I drank deep from the well.

"My queen?" the impostor asked.

"New kind of ghou, Neshamah?" I asked in Ashkaran.

The thing that was not George Redfern grinned.

"What gave it away?" the King of Death replied in the same

The lance of Night burned through his head in the blink of an eye, but every other knight and priest was moving. Flesh squelched and boiled as the ghouls squirmed out of the shells, turning into unnaturally flowing things with claws and gaping maws. There'd been no bodies, so they must have eaten the dead. Replaced them one by one over the span of the afternoon and evening, while I was distracted. Still, for all their vicious cleverness and sharp caution there were only a score of ghouls and one – and night had fallen. My staff struck the ground as I let loose my anger, lines of Night slithering outwards at breakneck speeds – the first ghoul I caught I speared through the flank, and when it tried to flow around the wound I detonated the strand into black flame. Two, three, four, five. Up the count went as they ran, first towards me and then away from me. I kept only the last alive, wrapping it in solid strands of Night instead of killing it. We'd need a containment box for it, but it would be headed towards the Belfry soon enough. I strode towards it, fingers clenched around my staff.

"You ought to know better than to try me by night, by now," I hissed.

The ghoul laughed, shaking in an unnatural spasm. It'd not been meant to make such a sound.

"Ought I?" the Dead King replied. "Catherine, Catherine. You never watch your back as carefully as you should."

I stilled. The priest had been standing over the Scorched Apostate, whose breathing had become so faint it almost couldn't be heard. The slight pressure I felt from the ghoul vanished, the Dead King's attention with it, and I turned my eyes to the boy on the stone. Who slowly put aside the blanket he'd been huddling under and rose to his feet in his too-large boots. His skin was pale. He was not breathing. The Scorched Apostate's hand rose and brightly shining flame gathered to it.

"I'm sorry, Tancred," I quietly said. "Gods, I'm so sorry."

I should have watched more closely, I should have moved quicker, I should have... I should have protected him.

"But it's not that kind of a war, is it?" I murmured, Night flooding my veins. "Sometimes, sometimes I just lose."

I took the part of me that felt like weeping and put it in the box.

I had a Revenant to kill.

Chapter 5: Expired

"It which does not take the knife of mistake by the grip is destined to take it by the blade instead."

– Drow saying

When I'd still been a girl of sixteen, the closest thing I ever got to a father taught me the basics of killing mages. *Hit them quick, Black had said, and don't give them time to dig in. Hinder visibility and close the distance. Always go for killing strokes, a wounded mage is twice as dangerous.* They'd been good lessons, time had taught me, though they shone most against Wasteland practitioners. Unfortunately, they'd been lessons meant to be used against mundane mages. Not Named. Not Revenants.

Those I'd learned to fight the hard way.

The Scorched Apostate's – no, he was just the Revenant now, lest guilt slow my hand – wrist came down jerkily and a strand of brilliant mageflame shot out towards me. It was quick for a spell of that calibre, both in casting and in movement. I breathed out and let the Night flow through my veins, chasing away the cool touch of spring and sharpening my eyesight. The properties of that spell were still unknown to me, so caution was in order. *Would that I'd believed that just a bell ago,* the thought came, bitter and unbidden. Dark power roiled in a circle, expanding outwards between myself and the flame as the unstable portal into Arcadia came into being with a quiet keening sound. The Revenant's other hand rose, flames gathering to it, but I wouldn't fall for this shallow a trick. I was already grasping the Night with my will when the still-moving strand went around the expanding portal, and I saw no need for great subtlety: I broke the strands that made up the edge of the portal-gate, leaving the working to violently collapse.

The detonation of Night did not disperse the flame, to my surprise, but it at least established that the Revenant's sorcery was not entirely unaffected the power I wielded: it was knocked off its trajectory. My sharpened sight picked out the way the Night seemed to unravel when in direct touch with the brightly shining flame, much as Night did when in direct contact with true Light. A consequence of *source purity*, Hierophant had once told me: Light was said to be a gift from Above, while Night ran from the fountainhead of Sve Noc. There was an inherent superiority to the fundamental stuff Light was made of. Magic should not have been able to mimic that effect, of course, but people kept telling me usurpation was the essence of sorcery for a reason. It didn't matter, though. This was a fresh Revenant, not a fully settled one, so when I painted surprise on my face and let the flame continue streaking towards me – swiftly joined by a second strand – it did not look any further. It did not notice the fine

line of Night I had slithering along the ground, the way it formed a loose circle around it.

When the first strand of bright flame came within two feet of me, I breathed out and took a step back through a gate into the Twilight Ways before closing it. I did not look at the kinder, softer starry sky above and simply kept my mind turned to the Night strand I'd left behind in Creation. Using it as a compass, I took five brisk steps forward before raising my staff and opening a gate back into Creation. The Revenant had the time to half-turn towards me before I unleashed a torrent of raw Night from the tip of my staff, aimed straight at its head.

Decapitation wouldn't kill one of them, it'd take more damage than that to break the necromancy animating it, but it *would* blind it. With the sole two spells it ought to be able to control still out there it should have no – ah, clever Revenant. Even as I stepped back out into Creation, in the same heartbeat it dismissed the sorcery it'd been using and began a fresh spell right on its own face. It wasn't quite quick enough, or powerful enough: half of my torrent remained untouched and so tore right through the left half of its face.

Even the right side was damaged, because it did not quite have the control to detonate one of its spells so close to itself harmlessly, but for a Revenant such surface damage was mere cosmetic. I struck the ground with my staff, seizing the circle of Night I'd left behind and sharpening it to an edge before pulling it tight: like a razor-sharp garotte, it sprung towards the Revenant at ankle-height like I'd pulled on a noose knot. For a heartbeat the undead Named hesitated. I was close, a mere three steps behind it, and it wanted to kill me. But its legs were being threatened. It chose, and chose poorly. Two spells bloomed, one striking toward the Night-wire and the other towards my face. That single heartbeat had allowed me to take a step forward, and so before the spell towards me could shoot out I slapped away the arm with the side of staff. It knocked the Revenant askew, which disrupted its aim with the other spell as well. As it tried and fail to gain its footing back, I struck out with my free hand even as the Night-wire sliced through its too-large boots – the box's lid trembled – at ankle height.

My fingers sunk into its chest, coated with Night, and I went looking for an aspect should there be any to take. Two-half formed, I found with cool disappointment, but nothing I could make my own. I still ripped out the shapeless bundle that tasted vaguely of sight, dust trickling down my fingers as I drew back and let the Revenant hit the ground. It had, I found, decent combat sense for one so freshly raised: it'd shot out the two spells after all, and instead of trying to form others from scratch it was now guiding both strands of bright flame straight towards my torso. It would have been a proper monster, I thought, if given time to sharpen. Instead I whisked out all the Night

still flowing through me, shaped it and tapped the butt of my staff against its chest once before taking a limping step back. The black flames I'd birthed ate through the flesh as if it were dry kindling, though not so fast that I did not have to take another two painful steps back to evade the strands of bright sorcery still chasing me.

The strands of flame gutted out suddenly, after the second step, but this wasn't my first Revenant fight. I left my own flame to its work until it was undeniable that more than half the body was gone, only then smothering them out with a twist of will. I breathed out, leaning against my staff, and felt my leg throb with violent pain. It was an almost welcome distraction from the way I'd taken a boy of fourteen under my protection and then he'd not even lasted through the *fucking night*. Though she made no sound at all, I felt Akua's presence in the Night as she hurried at my side. Too late for the fight, which had felt like it lasted an hour but in practice couldn't even have lasted a long prayer's length. The hem of her dress sweeping the wet grass and stoe as she slowed her pace, the shade came to stand at my side. She followed my gaze, which had dipped beyond Tancred's broken corpse to the mutilated remnants of the ghouls who'd eaten and impersonated my escort.

If she offered me sympathy – pity by another name – Gods forgive me, but I'd find a way to put her back into the godsdamned cloak. I was in no mood for platitudes.

"A new breed of ghouls," Akua said, tone calm. "Impersonators?"

I breathed in, breathed out. Good. Yes, there were more important matters at hand than the way I felt like screaming.

"Yes. They were slightly off," I said. "Too small, maybe? It was hard to tell."

"It might be a matter of mass," she suggested. "It tends to be one of limitations for shapeshifters."

"Sisters make it that those are too expensive to make often," I grunted back. "They weren't anything to boast of in combat, not like the war-breeds, but that's clearly what not they're meant for."

"The presage boxes the Arsenal makes can be used to weed out such impostors," Akua noted. "Assuming those ghouls are, in fact, still necromantic constructs."

"They are, the Dead King was able to speak through one. But the boxes glow when there's *any* undead within a hundred feet, Akua," I skeptically said. "Sure, this far behind our lines that'll work as a test but out there on campaign? I'll be damned if they don't be turn into lanterns you can't even put out."

"We might need to rely on priests until more precise instruments can be created, then," the shade said. "Regardless, as a preliminary to deeper studies you've left enough of the corpses that they can be tested for baser weaknesses."

"Back to camp, then," I said, keeping my voice steady. "We'll put the bodies in the Night. Do the same with the villagers, and some of the building materials as well. We're trying to recover more than the seeds now: we'll have to see if they can reproduce the Revenant's sorcery as well."

"Agreed," Akua said. "It can be done within half an hour, I'd wager. If you would retrieve your mount?"

I breathed in, breathed out. The horses, the one's that'd not moved much. They still hadn't, so they'd probably been killed, but I'd have to make sure.

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, I can do that."

The golden-eyed woman stood at my side, still as only a shade could be. Waiting for me to move first. I took a step, fingers taut around the yew, and caught sight of the horse blanket still on the flat stone where the boy had been sleeping.

"*Fuck*," I hissed out.

Leaving my staff to stand unnaturally upright in my wake, I strode away. Even with only one woman for audience it would have felt childish to throw it down. Yet the urge to just break something was consuming my hand, the desire so strong Night was flickering around my hands without having been called upon.

"I should have caught it, Akua," I said. "*I should have godsdamn caught it*. I'm getting slow on the uptake. Worse yet I'm getting sloppy. I should have dragged him back to camp immediately even if he had to ride with the survivors the whole way. Instead I waited here for you and the kid got killed because I figured we could take it slightly easy just once."

I was starting to make mistakes, and I couldn't afford mistakes.

"Yes," Akua Sahelian frankly said. "You should have."

It should have angered me, the way she confirmed my disgrace without so much as a speck of hesitation, but it didn't. I wouldn't have allowed myself to lose my grip around her if I'd not been willing to suffer that sort of appraisal in the first place.

"I wouldn't fallen for something like this in Iserre," I said. "Or even in Salia. I'm losing my touch."

I'd run rings around the Pilgrim and the Tyrant, but now a pack of fresh ghouls was enough to snatch a boy under my protection? I would have called it humiliating, if the greater failure here wasn't that a kid had been slain and put down again, so instead I just called it shameful.

"The Graveyard was the span of a single night," Akua said. "Salia of a few evenings – the parts that mattered, at least."

I turned a hard glare on her, but she did not bat an eye. Why would she? She'd faced me down when I'd come at her with steel and Winter, with Name and host. She had no fear of my temper, this one.

"If you use even the sharpest sword in the world every single day, it is only a matter of time until its edge grows dull," the shade told me.

"We've all been in the same war, Diabolist," I snarled. "That's not an excuse."

Because the heroes weren't faltering, were they? Or Archer, or Hierophant, or even grizzled old Klaus Papenheim – who'd lost so much it sometimes beggared my comprehension as to how he got up in the morning.

"You have been the preeminent general in Hainaut's defence for more than year," Akua evenly replied, "while also acting as captain and peacemaker for Named or Blood of every stripe, serving as one of the chief strategists of the Grand Alliance and, all the while, being the diplomatic broker between it and the Empire Ever Dark."

"That-"

"I am by no mean excusing you, Catherine," Akua interrupted, meeting my anger without blinking. "This is a failure, and an even starker one is the way you came to make this one in the first place. You were warned by Adjutant that you could only take so much on your shoulders without running yourself ragged. You did not heed his words."

"Didn't I?" I snapped. "I as good as handed over Callow and the negotiations for the Accords to Vivienne. Hakram sifts through every single report and letter before they make it to my desk, culling what doesn't need me in particular – Hells, I haven't seen an actual list of our supply stocks in a year, only summaries. Indrani and her band are handling finding the new Named, Masego and Roland are running the Arsenal. I don't even strike beyond our defensive lines anymore: we send out bands of five!"

I panted quietly, the tirade having set my lungs aflame.

"How much more can I possibly delegate?" I asked. "I'm not whining, Akua, I'm genuinely asking – how much more of this can I *possibly delegate*?"

"Turn over full command of the Third Army to General Abigail," the golden-eyed shade answered without missing a beat.

"She's not there yet," I said. "Not against-"

"Then demote her, or name someone able in her stead," Akua said. "You are making, dearest, an old mistake of my people."

"Haven't raised any flying fortresses, have I?" I scoffed.

"You have warred with the same enemy for too long, fought him too often," she said, tone flat. "The Dead King is learning your back of tricks, your art of war. You are teaching your strengths and weaknesses to the Enemy, Catherine, and it is learning. That you tire, that you grow impatient, that sometimes kindness is what moves your hand instead of practicality."

The thing was, Merciless Gods, that she might just be right. I wanted to dismiss her, to ask who if not me, to tell her that insisting on seeing Creation always through the eyes of the Wasteland would lead her to mistake after mistake. Except she'd not been the one to slip-up, had she? And she might not have been the only one to notice I was getting tired, either. Was that why Razin and Aquiline had started pushing me again, testing boundaries I'd thought settled? The Dominion's nobles, as a rule, were not the kind of people who'd let a weakening warlord keep the reins. My own people hadn't said anything, but would they? To Callowans, I was still the Black Queen. If it looked like I was slipping, how many of them would simply assume a fresh game was afoot?

"You need to step back," Akua said. "Sharpen your edge once more and return to the field only on your own terms. Else you will bury yourself in a grave you insisted on digging every shovelful of yourself."

I gestured sharply at her, before limping back to my staff, and she did not say more. Adjutant, I thought, would have gently kept prodding until I either agreed or dismissed. Unlike him, Akua Sahelian was well-acquainted with the sin of pride: the shade said nothing that would further bruise mine. She would not bring this up again, I knew, for which I was almost grateful. I'd turn to Hakram for advice over this, trusting in the clarity of his gaze where mine grew muddled, but I would be able to move towards the decision on my own terms. For the grace of Akua's approach I was almost grateful, yes, but also bitterly angry. Because if I could have had this, the best of her, without the rest?

"Sometimes," I said, tone low and fierce, "I wish you..."

She'd been a master at keeping her thoughts away from her face even before she'd gained the ability to shape it at will, but the sudden stillness of it gave her away. Surprise.

"It doesn't matter," I said, shaking my head.

A hundred thousand souls, for which there would be a price long in the taking. That much was an absolute truth, a bedrock. A look passed through the golden eyes, one that straddled the line between loathing and yearning. I had, once more, offered artless cruelty. Akua Sahelian was too good a liar not to have caught it'd been genuine feeling that moved me to speak.

"I'll find my horse," I said, cutting through the stillness. "And take care of the corpses here. I'll leave Marserac to you."

Golden eyes met mine and only then did she incline her head.

"As you say," Akua Sahelian murmured.

—

We took the Twilight Ways back to camp, laden with corpses kept in the Night.

That sort of capacity was one of advantages the bounty of my patronesses boasted compared to the Light, which tended to be its superior in direct applications and confrontations. Dimensional pockets were usually the province of talented mages, who required significant power and resources to establish them, or of Named — Black, for example, had been able to carry quite the arsenal in his shadow when he'd still been the Black Knight. It was a rarer ability in heroes than villains, though not unheard of. The Myrmidon had one, as I recalled. Having a domain could allow Named to cheat, too, if they were clever enough and its nature allowed. It was still a rather rare skill, in the larger scheme of things, and one priests were patently incapable of learning. In contrast, knowledge of how to create such a space in the Night was considered a useful but hardly uncommon Secret among the Mighty. It required a certain amount of power not held beneath the lesser ranks of the Mighty, but aside from that little was needed to have one save knowledge of the trick.

The warm breeze of the realm I'd seen the birth of turned into outright wind, when flying on Zombie's back, but I hardly minded. The noise of it against my ears was drowning out all thoughts save for the most disjointed, too much of a distraction for a brooding mood to truly seize me. Akua, once more on swan's wings, was keeping pace with me further down. We'd used the same crack to slip through into Twilight, so like me she'd not need the use of a gate to return to Creation — or, indeed, to be guided towards an exit beyond what the starlit compass provided. It was the subtler means of using this realm, though in some ways also

the most difficult of the two; for there were two ways to use the Twilight Ways for travel, at least that we'd grasped so far.

The first was rather similar in nature to using Arcadia, the making of a gate using power. The crux of the difference was in the ease of use: to enter Arcadia there'd been need of either a powerful ritual by mages taught in that branch of sorcery, or that a sufficiently powerful fae intervened. Oh, there were natural places of alignment between Arcadia and Creation where anyone could cross through freely – there was one near Refuge, and allegedly one in the depths of the Brocelian Forest – but those were rare and the fae often made sport of those who ventured though. In contrast, the Twilight Ways had always been meant to be used for travel: they welcomed such use, encouraged it and enabled it. Mages found it easy to open a temporary small gate without even a ritual if the fabric of Creation was thin enough where they tried, and even elsewhere the amount of power needed to form such a gate was significantly smaller than if one had tried the same with Arcadia. More importantly, it required less skill. It'd been described to me as the Ways reaching out and meeting the spellcaster halfway, helping them... anchor, for lack of a better term.

And it was not only mages who could succeed at this. It was possible with Night as well, though the Mighty had admitted to me that drow seemed to need a certain knack to be able to do so no matter how powerful they were. Said knack seemed, to my amusement, to run particularly strong among the Losara Sigil as well as another band of familiar souls: the Longstride Cabal in the far north, who'd once tried to hunt me in Great Strycht. Light could open a gate as well, though once more there seemed to be some ineffable requirement we poorly understood: the Lanterns could create such gates almost to a man, while Procerans struggled greatly and my own House Insurgent had proved incapable of consistent results. No matter the provenance or power, though, all had the benefit of what some Arlesite poet had named the '*starlit compass*'. Anyone entering the Twilight Ways with a clear destination in mind would feel the call of that destination ahead of them, and known where to weave a gate out. Not so accurately as I had when I'd been Sovereign of Moonless Night, but usually within a mile of where they intended to arrive.

This was also the method by which permanent gates could be established, though we'd found that to be chancy business. A physical, permanent gate tended to disrupt every other kind of gating in the region around it and they were finicky beasts besides. Hierophant had nearly lost an arm trying to make a second one, afterwards telling me that the Ways had somehow been *displeased* by him being the architect of more than one. The Witch of the Woods, on the other hand, had forged one on the outskirts of Salia in an afternoon's work and without any difficulty whatsoever. We still knew so little about the Ways, in the end,

and perhaps come better days we'd be able to spend the scholars to plumb the depths of the secrets but as it was the Belfry had too much on its plate to be able to spend many hours on it. Besides, I was disinclined to complain too much of the eccentricities of Twilight when one of them was the realm's active antipathy for the Dead King and all his works.

The second manner of using the Ways was the one Akua and I had used tonight, which Archer – who'd effectively pioneered it, and still remained a finer practitioner of than anyone save perhaps the Grey Pilgrim himself – had named *sidling*. Those of us with senses that were not entirely physical could often sense where the fabric of Creation thinned, but with practice it could be learned to feel out where there were... cracks between Creation and the Twilight Ways. Cracks one could slip through when they were found, though they were ephemeral things and particularly capricious where gates of any sort had been recently used. It could take some time to find the cracks, and often required some luck as well as fine senses, which was why near everyone using the method was either Named or nonhuman. Given the difficulties involved one might be tempted to dismiss *sidling* as an inferior form of travel, save for two facts: sidled paths through the Ways were measurably faster and more precise than those come of gates, and there were also completely traceless.

A Twilight gate, even only a temporary one, could found by scrying, rituals or even just having a sufficiently sensitive entity close when it happened – whenever we used them to deploy troops against the Dead King, the surprise was strategic and almost never tactical. Our presence was known ahead of being seen, always. Archer, on the other hand, had once sidled out of the Ways with her entire band with only a crumbling wall between her and the Prince of Bones and the Revenant hadn't had a clue before she shot it in the back of the head. Not that it'd killed the thing, but it'd been a gallant effort. Beneath me, the black swan Akua had shapeshifted into began a graceful arc downwards and I led Zombie into the same. The wind's howl picked up, until my mount landed at a gallop and obeyed the touch of my hand by folding in her wings. I pressed down against her mane even as Akua's graceful form passed between what seemed to be two raised stones and disappeared.

Zombie navigated the slope leading down to the raised stones and slipped between them: a heartbeat later, after a sensation like a hand passing through my hair, we were on Creation again.

As a testament to the accuracy of *sidling*, we'd emerged a mere twenty feet away from the camp's main gate. Akua's elegant landing had seen her rise into human shape again, and she caught up to me after I reined in my horse's heady gallop to a halt. By the time the shade was once more at my side, a frown had made its way onto my face: I was looking at the camp, and not liking what

I was seeing. The outer defences were untroubled, remaining both well-manned and vigilant. The army camp's layout was a recent advance, a merging of the Belfry's advances in temporary warding and the demands of military efficient: four interlocked squares, all sharing the same initial lines of defence. First a ditch dug into the ground, followed by a thin stripe of solid ground leading to a second ditch, itself leading directly into a traditional Legion palisade, bolstered by watchtowers. The stripe of solid ground between ditches had stone markers wedged in at regular intervals, carved with a runic ward that would produce a loud bell-like ringing sound as well as begin glowing should there be movement within the span of the ward.

The teeth of the defence were at the bottom of the second ditch: spikes might not do much against undead, but the gout of flame from enchanted metal rods and the Light-infused stones could turn the bottom of the palisade into a brutal killing yard.

The warding stones had not been activated, and atop the palisade the watchful gazes of a mixture of Callowan and Proceran soldiers were not something I found any fault in. It was the pulsing lights at the heart of the camp, where the four squares interlocked, that had me frowning. Each of the squares held its own separate set of three large-scale protection wards – against scrying, vermin and illusions – but they were also connected to the central array near my own tent. That array was mostly there to serve as a stabilizer, but it could also be used to forcefully purge power that accumulated in any of the wards because of imprecisions in how they were laid. Essentially it was a pressure valve we could activate before the wards started breaking down from the impurities, though the act of release itself sent out a pulse of power that tended to screw with all the lesser enchantments and wards within the camps so we very much avoided using it if we could. Yet it'd been activated tonight, that much was clear from the way there were still glimmering lights above the centre of the camp.

Likely more than once, too, for the leftover sorcery to be this visible.

"Akua?" I prompted.

"It was activated when there were no accumulated impurities to purge," the shade said, sounding displeased.

She would be, having personally set down the central array this ought to have turned into a proper mess.

"And what would that actually do?" I asked.

"Still send out a pulse of sorcery," Akua said. "Yet it would be weaker, and the sorcery would be drawn from wards that are

functioning as intended. Likely it would damage them, perhaps even crack the wardstones."

I vehemently cursed in Kharsum. The materials for those were damned expensive, as you couldn't just carve runes and lay enchantments on any slab of sandstone grabbed from the side of the road if you wanted to make proper wards: you had to get materials from places where power of one sort or another had flowed for a long time. Even worse, it was the labour of weeks if not months to both anchor the ward in the stone and then align that ward with the rest of the wardstones so they'd bolster each other instead of conflict.

"Unless my general staff and Princess Beatrice suddenly went mad, they'll have an explanation for it," I said, in a tone that implied they damn well better have an explanation for it.

Ahead of us the watch had seen us lingering in front of the gate, and by the sounds of it recognized our admittedly distinctive appearances. Hails were sent out and I answered with my raised staff, which was enough to get the gates open. A group of five Lanterns, twice as many Proceran fantassins and what looked like one of the Third Army's mages bid us to approach, the mage holding a presage box in her hands.

"There is someone else with the authority to order such purging," Akua pensively said.

She was right, I considered as we entered the camp and the gates thunderously closed behind us. There was one more.

Which meant, like as not, that the White Knight was back early.

Chapter 6: Equivalent

"Fairness is the refrain of the lazy, the inept, the heroic. Anyone unwilling to stack the deck and murder the judge to seize victory has no place wielding any real power."

– Dread Emperor Callous

I'd seen enough presage boxes by now I could tell who it was from the Workshop that'd made them. The Blind Maker's carved enchantments were in beautifully fluid cursive, like the High Tyrian they derived from, and they felt warm to the touch. The Bitter Blacksmith – the heroine, not her villain brother at the Morgentor – chiselled in hers with swift, impersonal precision while avoiding flourishes. She had little taste for such work and always sought to finish it as quickly as was possible without compromising quality. The Hunted Magician, whose work was being held up in front of me right now, took to the craft with the same amount of cryptic paranoia that was his signature in everything else. Though the symbols he used were some sort of ancient Mavii

runes and like much of that ancient people's work they were as much art as function, within them the villain carved entirely unnecessary and unrelated symbols. Masego had told me that carving those signs in any order but what it must have originally been done in would make the box fail to function, sounding about as impressed by this as he'd been miffed.

The runes on the side, which I fancied to look like a wheel woven from winds when taken in all at once, remained inert even when brought close to me. The mage from the Third Army – a lieutenant, by the stripes – tested Akua as well before drawing back with a sharp nod at the rest of the force surrounding us. She saluted me, pointedly not looking at Akua more than she needed to. Blonde, that woman, I noted. Liessen did tend to be fair-haired.

"Your Majesty," she greeted me in Chantant. "Lieutenant Eve Baldry, tenth company. I'm currently under loan to Captain Raphael Twice-Drowned of the Ardeni Guard."

Fantassins, then, not proper Volignac foot. The ten soldiers who'd come along with the Lanterns and the lieutenant had undeniably had that look about them, it must be said. It wasn't a question of equipment, not anymore, as Cordelia had with my enthusiastic blessing begun offering to pay the mercenary companies with good steel the moment trade with the Kingdom Under opened again. Nowadays fantassins were not significantly better or worse off in equipment than Proceran regulars, though the personal armies of the princes and princesses still boasted superior arms as well as training. But where regulars and sworn men wore the colours of some royalty or another, fantassins wore marks just as garish as the names of their leaders and companies. As a rule, the more outlandish the names and colours the longer they'd been in the mercenary trade, which meant the eye-watering shades of orange and green on their feathered helms were a good sign.

Any soldiers wearing colours that bright in a war against Black's legions would get a goblin arrow in the throat before the campaign's first night was over, but the Principate had fought a different sort of wars in the days before the Dead King. The Ardeni Guard was not familiar to me as I knew only the most distinguished of the companies in Hainaut, like the Grands Routiers and Hermosa Foxes. I'd taken Klaus Papenheim's solid advice and left Princess Beatrice Volignac to handle the fantassins along with southern Procer process as a whole, which meant I was not forced to entertain half a hundred swaggering captains for meals regularly but also that I was only passingly knowledgeable about that particular slice of our forces. I cast a curious glance at the Lanterns – faces painted white and gold and built like they'd spent the better part of their lives in a shield wall instead of a temple – but got no introduction out of them, only respectful nods. The formal priesthood the Dominion

answered to only the Gods Above, in principle, and not even the Holy Seljun could command something of them should they be disciplined. In practice they tended to be receptive to requests from the Blood, though not to the point of outright subservience. The only person I'd ever seen the warrior-priests take a knee for was the Grey Pilgrim.

To me they offered respect but no great deference, and to use them on the field I usually needed to pass the order down to them through Aquiline or Razin. Inconvenient, but given how brutally effective they'd proved against undead I'd keep my complaining down to a pittance.

"Well met, lieutenant," I replied in Lower Miezan. "I don't suppose you could tell me what the lights above are about?"

"Above my paygrade I'm afraid, ma'am," the blonde mage said. "I heard there was a scuffle, but my orders didn't come with a briefing attached. Captain Raphael might know, though, they're in charge of the gate for the first night rotation."

I frowned. I was more inclined to head directly to the heart of the camp and interrogate someone in charge than stop by for a chat with a fantassin captain, but the casualness of the mage's reply was surprising me. She did not seem concern in the slightest.

"Muster wasn't sounded?" I asked.

"It wasn't," Lieutenant Baldry confirmed.

Akua hummed out in amusement.

"The White Knight has returned, hasn't he?" she asked.

The Callowan lieutenant turned a cold glare to the shade, long enough to acknowledge a question had been asked before turning to me to answer it.

"Lord White returned about half a bell ago, ma'am," Lieutenant Baldry agreed. "He's got another two Named with him, though I can't say I recognized either."

I could have said I was warned of another's coming by the sound of footsteps, but that would almost have been untrue. The sound of boots on earth was a small thing compared to the almost aggressive loudness of what the approaching soldier was wearing: there was a good coat of mail somewhere under there, and a cuirass, but it was almost hard to see under the green-and-orange striped vest that went down to their thigh, which were in turn covered by bouffant pants going down to the knees that added bright blue to the palette. None of the... frills, though, seemed to hinder movement: the pants were tucked into good steel

greaves, and the vest was close enough to the body it shouldn't get caught in anything when a sword was being swung. The long dyed hair, half orange and half green with two small stripes of blue, was the finishing touch to the ensemble, framing an almost comically unremarkable face. The fantassins parted for them, which allowed me an easy guess.

"Captain Raphael?" I asked in Chantant.

Gods, let them be the captain. I was not sure my eyes could physically take the amount of garishness it would take for the captain to out-peacock this one.

"We meet once more, Black Queen," the Proceran boldly replied. "A strange turn of fate, that would see us fight side by side when we were once enemies."

I smiled blandly, wondering if I was meant to have any clue at all who this was beyond some mercenary captain. Still, it wouldn't do to let anyone know I was confused.

"Yes," I gallantly tried. "That is true."

At my side Akua's stance stiffened the slightest bit, which was the Sahelian equivalent of uproarious laughter at my expense. All right, so maybe it'd not been the finest of my illusions.

"Twice-Drowned?" I prodded, cocking my head to the side.

"When the grounds collapsed at the Battle of Trifelin, I fell into an underground well," Captain Raphael smiled. "Along with a few hundred pounds of stone. Yet it was still more pleasant an evening than being subjected to your tender mercies at the Battle of the Camps, Your Majesty."

Trifelin was, from what I recalled, a major defeat that Princess Rozala had been inflicted in the early months of her defence of Cleves the first time she'd been charged with the defence of the principality. It'd been a hard setback that could have turned into a proper disaster had heroes not held the rearguard of the retreat. Impressive they'd survived that mess when standing in the thick of it, much less the implication they'd been on the field at the Camps when I'd opened the gate into Arcadia and dropped a lake on the crusaders. *Someone to keep an eye on*, I decided. Survive enough scraps by the skin of your teeth, these days, and a Name might not be too far ahead.

"You may rest assured, captain, that when lakes next fall you'll be on the side welcoming it," I said, tone droll. "And as it happens, I've questions you might have the answer to."

"It would be my pleasure, Your Majesty," the captain replied with a sweeping bow.

I took a step forward, Akua falling in behind, only to found Captain Raphael had offered me their arm. *How long has it been since someone tried that?* I wondered, baffled and just a little charmed. I took the offered courtesy and we walked towards the closest watchtower, where a brazier was being used to roast meat in a way that would have seen a legionary of my armies harshly reprimanded for. Fantassins, though, had different standards of discipline.

"I have heard that the White Knight returned," I began.

"Indeed," the captain agreed. "Along with the Valiant Champion and a girl from parts unknown."

I forced my face to remain calm, my fingers to remain unclenched. The Valiant Champion, huh. Hanno was usually cleverer than this when bringing strays home – that I'd not skinned that so-called *heroine* alive and made a cloak out of the leather was already showing great restraint, as far as I was concerned. The Champion was an ally in the fight against Keter, and so would be extended all courtesies and privileges that the Truce and Terms required of me. Yet I'd rather eat my own hand than offer a thimble more to that woman, and that was not an enmity that would ever be buried.

"And it was Lord Hanno who ordered the use of the warding array?" I asked.

Raphael nodded and leaned in close, lowering their voice.

"I am told there was some manner of infiltration by the Dead King," the captain said. "It was quickly dealt with through use of the sorcery that lies at the heart of the camps, though that section still remains closed."

"Casualties?" I bluntly asked.

It wasn't that Neshamah wasn't capable of subtlety: he was, and often the costs of missing his quieter schemes were the stuff nightmares were made of. On the other hand, even if Hanno had ridden in with providence at his back to unmask the Hidden Horror's latest ploy this seemed too sloppy of an attempt to feasibly have lasted on the long term. Which meant this wasn't an infiltration attempt, it was strapping goblinfire to a sapper's back and sending him running at a gate. The Dead King was always willing to trade lives or resources for corpses, even at seemingly ruinous rates.

"I know not, Your Majesty," Captain Raphael said. "Though I was told the central camp was closed by the Deadhand's order, so your man ought to have the answers you seek."

He usually did, truth be told. I'd come to sincerely believe that the Empire's occupation of my homeland might have led to widespread chaos and rebellion within a few years, if Scribe hadn't been at my father's side. Like Black, who'd never settled in a Callowan city to rule the kingdom from, I'd been forced to discharge a great many responsibilities from a glum succession of army camps, small towns and fortresses – without Hakram keeping everything organized even as we moved, it would have all gone to shit with remarkable haste. Even now, he tended to know more about what was going on in the camp than I did.

"Then I will seek him in turn," I said. "I thank you for the conversation, Captain Raphael."

Taking the hint, they adroitly extricated their arm from mine and offered another gallant bow.

"Until fate deigns to reunite us, Black Queen," the mercenary smoothly replied.

While I wasn't always the, uh, sharpest when it came to picking up on this sort of thing I was pretty sure I was being flirted with. One hand, well, *Alamans*. They'd try to seduce the Choir of Contrition, if the angels showed enough leg. On the other hand, it was kind of flattering. It'd been a while since someone without a Name had tried their hand at that with me, even so superficially. It put the slightest of springs to my step as I left the fantassin captain behind. Akua did not say a word, though she did begin walking at my side instead of remaining a step behind as we headed deeper into camp.

"Hakram's on board with whatever the White Knight pulled, sounds like," I murmured.

Reassuring, that. I'd come to put a surprising degree of trust onto Hanno's shoulders, since the Peace of Salia, but it was not the kind of trust that went without questioning or disagreement. Adjutant, though, I trusted implicitly. I might as well begin questioning my own limbs, should I not. If he'd backed this there was a good reason it for it.

"The Sword of Judgement has proved a capable ally," Akua conceded. "And unlike some of his more rambunctious colleagues, he is not one to resort to collateral damage when there are other approaches to be had."

That'd been a pleasant surprise, since while heroes tended to be careful with the lives of others they tended to be a great deal less so with equipment. Even when that equipment was very, very valuable. It was a cold hard truth that there were artefacts and siege machinery in this camp that were worth more than soldiers, and though that was an ugly thing to face it came with being a professional soldier. I could send for reinforcements, if what

was lost was lives, but there were only so many wardstones to distribute across all the fronts and they were not easily replaced.

"He's a solid one," I grunted in agreement.

I wouldn't have been able to pull off the Terms and Truce without him, that much couldn't be denied. There'd been heroes that simply would not have been willing to deal with a villain if he'd not leant me the weight of his seal of approval, and that would have led to deaths. Even just a few of those would have made it seem like I was trying to conscript Named into my service, which would have gone... badly. Tariq still had a lot of pull with heroes he'd helped or saved when they were younger, that much couldn't be denied, but as word of my raising him from the dead at the Graveyard had spread so had rumours that he was somehow under my influence. He was no longer the unquestioned grandfatherly fount of wisdom he'd once been to his side, though his record over the last two years had certainly begun redeeming the dip in his reputation.

The avenue leading to the heart of the camp was guarded by checkpoints at regular intervals and it was not long before we found our first one, along with a proper company of my soldiers. The captain commanding it knew about as much as Captain Raphael had, which wasn't much, but she sent a runner ahead of us along before providing us with a full line in escort. I did not need more defending inside my own camp, but twenty legionaries at your back did tend to expedite most conversations. We continued deeper in, the sparse conversation I'd shared with Akua petering out entirely. I spoke with my soldiers instead, learning with pleasure that the line's lieutenant was an old hand from the Fifteenth. He'd been from the second wave of Callowan recruits, after Three Hills and Marchford – when Black had essentially emptied the Legion training camps in the kingdom and tossed all those green men my way.

"Lost a finger at Dormer," Lieutenant Oliver told me almost eagerly. "From one of them Immortals critters, after the Hellhound sent us up the hill."

"They were hard bastards, even for fae," I said. "Summer's finest."

"Shit name though, no offence Your Majesty," the veteran snorted, and I grinned back. "After Lady Dartwick nicked those banners, they were pretty moral when the gobbos from ninth company unloaded. Finger got fixed up good anyway, one of them Soninke wizards from Afolabi's legion put it right back on."

"Not even a scar?" I teased. "All the best war stories have scars to go with them."

"Aye," Lieutenant Oliver mourned. "It tingles a little when there's magic in the air, I know it, but these fresh pups from after the Folly don't believe me. Say it's all in my head."

"Tell them you have me convinced, next time," I suggested.

"That ought to make a few of the little pricks piss their armour," Lieutenant Oliver gleefully said, then remembered who he was speaking to. "Um, Your Majesty."

I snorted, clapped the man's shoulder.

"I've spent more time on a saddle than a throne, soldier," I reminded him amusedly. "By all means, make the little pricks piss their armour."

That got a howl of laughter out of the lot of them, and it was in a better mood that I hit the second checkpoint. Where, looming tall above Osenia sworn swords, I found the key to getting answers about what had happened in the camp tonight. No amount of polish would ever remove the scorch marks Summer flame had left on Adjutant's plate, though as time passed he'd come to like the look. It was distinctive, as was his height even among his own kind. The black, fur-like hair nowadays going down to his jaw on the sides was another distinction, as it was far longer than either Legion or Army regulations would allow. Still, there was a reason he was not known as the Blacksteel: the most distinctive part of all was the fleshless hands, one of sheer bone and the other cast in pale spectral light. Hakram Deadhand had earned his sobriquet twice over, and *Dead the Hand* remained a favourite to sing among my soldiers.

A few lines had even been added after his scrap with the Baron of Thorns, as his brutal dismantling of the Revenant while reciting orc poetry had made something of an impression. Hakram strode through the Levantine armymen, either not noticing or caring how a few of them had to hastily move out of the way or been bowled over. His broad face looked relieved.

"Catherine," he greeted me, arm taking arm in a legionary's salute. "I'd wondered if you were ambushed. Beastmaster knew little, but it seemed likely."

"We were," I darkly replied.

Good mood gone the way of mist under morning sun, I fixed a calm look on my face before dismissing my legionary escort with a few kind words. By the considering look on Hakram's face, he'd picked up on the general vicinity of how badly my night had gone.

"So were we," Adjutant added in a low voice as we passed through the checkpoint.

He settled at my right side, so naturally I almost didn't notice, while Akua took my left. Not an unapt summation of the last two years, I thought.

"What happened?" I quietly asked. "Our defences shouldn't allow for infiltration, Hakram. We've put the stones in every gate, any enchantment he hits our people with should be disrupted."

"Ghouls slipped in," the tall orc told me. "A new kind, that can-"

"Shapeshift," Akua murmured.

Hakram shot her a considering look and she offered back a slight nod.

"Your escort," Adjutant told me, and it was not a question.

"We have the bodies in the Night," I said.

A halfwit would have put one and one together, given that much to go on, and Hakram was the very opposite.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Beastmaster said he was just a boy."

My finger clenched around my staff until the knuckles turned white.

"Sometimes we just lose," I softly replied, through teeth I did not remember clenching.

It fit, though. I felt like my entire body was clenching every time I thought of the kid I'd had to put down because of my own sloppiness.

"I'll be seeing what duties I can shake loose, to avoid repeating the mistakes that led do that loss," I forced out.

As if by coincidence, his flank leaned against mine. It was the most comfort either of us would allow him to give me in public but, trivial as it might seem, I was shamefully grateful for it.

"The presage boxes should have caught them," I said, and if my voice was a little choked all three of us pretended not to have heard it.

"We've found a weakness in our defences," Adjutant gravelled. "The Order of Broken Bells."

Akua caught on before me, somewhat unsurprisingly. Generations of her forbears had cut their teeth on this very obstacle, after all.

"Their armour," the golden-eyed shade said. "The same hymn carvings that disrupt active sorcery prevented the ghouls from triggering the boxes."

Fuck, I thought. The weakness we could fix, the corpses we could not. I'd lost even more knights, by the sounds of it.

"Talbot?" I asked.

Losing him would be a setback. Not only was he the highest-ranking noble officer in my armies, the man had essentially put the Broken Bells together from scratch. In both politics and war, his death would be a loss keenly felt.

"Getting his eye fixed by the White Knight's fresh helper," Hakram replied. "The ghouls were caught out before they could finish what they'd been sent for."

My eyes narrowed, relief at the Grandmaster of the Broken Bells surviving being shoved at the back of my mind.

"Assassinations, but that's nothing new," I said. "Wouldn't have been worth revealing another breed of ghouls for. They went after the wardstones."

"They meant to contaminate the lesser array in the Third Army camp," the orc confirmed. "They were caught out by the White Knight, but the alarm being rung only made them strike out aggressively."

"Losses?" Akua asked.

"Light," Adjutant said. "Twenty dead, half again that wounded. They aimed for high-ranking officers but got caught before getting to them. The wardstones from the Third's camp were hit with some sort of sorcery that Senior Mage Dastardly called 'poisonous'. He had some difficulty elaborating on this, but was adamant it was a problem."

I felt Akua gaze's fall on me.

"Go," I said. "I'll want a damage assessment as soon as you can deliver."

She bowed, more for the eyes peeled on us than anything else, and without another word melted into the nearest shadows.

"So the array purge was used to flush out the 'poison'," I said, then flicked a glance at the lights in the distance.

It'd take more than one purge to have that much sorcerous aftermath left behind.

"Whatever shapeshifting trick it is the ghouls use, it is of a nature similar to enchantment," Hakram replied.

And the sorcery sent flowing out by a purge screwed with enchantments, which was why I disliked using those in the first place.

"It unmasked them," I mused. "Clever."

Sounded like Hanno, too. He preferred helping people help themselves rather than sweeping in on a white horse and fixing everything before disappearing into the sunset. Hopefully that hadn't cost us a few months of vulnerability to the Dead King's tricks, though. Gods, the vermin wards better be fucking holding at least. The atrocities Neshamah could commit with undead rats and bugs were not something I ever intended to suffer through again.

"I ordered the central camp closed as soon as we learned, but they were already inside," Hakram told me. "They eat and impersonate people at a distressing rate, Catherine. We think the Barrow Sword and the White Knight's followers cleared them out, but we're keeping the camp closed until everyone with access to the stones has been cleared with both Light and sorcery."

I grunted in approval.

"Full audit of the ranks come morning," I said. "I don't care if they grumble, there'll be no risks taken with something that dangerous. And for the Order-"

"Talbot already offered that every knight should dismount and submit to testing by Light whenever they enter camp," Hakram told me.

"We'll see if something less clumsy can be arranged," I replied.

I had clever enough people in my employ, and if nothing else I could have Razin and Aquiline cut their teeth on the logistics of it. After I shoved them back into the Pilgrim's tender embrace, they'd hold their commands without my looking over their shoulder. They needed to be prepared to deal with situations like this on their own. This deep in the camp and with Adjutant at my side, we went through the last checkpoints without anyone trying to stop us. Even though the situation had, in principle, already been handled I still wanted to at least speak with Hanno. Besides, since he'd brought in another Named I would prefer having a look at them before too long. Best not to have one of those wandering camp without being able to put a Name and face to them, even if a name wasn't always forthcoming. The last ring of defences was manned entirely by the Army of Callow, which did tend to end up with those duties by virtue of both being my personal army and the best organized of the troops. When the Iron

Prince's own troops were around it was another story, but Prince Klaus was far from here, holding the northern defence line in our absence.

I got to hit three birds with one stone when the captain in command informed me that the White Knight was currently in the same tent where Grandmaster Brandon Talbot was being healed, supervising the work being done by the healer he'd brought in. It wasn't a long walk from there, and I knew my way around the camp well: a few moments later I was parting open the tent flap and passing it to Hakram before slipping into the tent. Within a heartbeat of that I saw a half-naked Brandon Talbot try to rise to his feet, to the vocal if inarticulate protest of the two heroes in the tent, but he only stopped when I sharply gestured for him to sit.

"Don't blind yourself on my account," I said. "My queenly honour will withstand your staying seated."

"Much obliged, Your Majesty," Grandmaster Talbot replied.

He was careful not to move his head this time, having been levied a heavy frown by the healer in front of him.

"The nerves were almost healed," said young girl mourned. "We'll have to start over, Sir Brandon. Please remain still, if it pleases you."

The tent flap closed behind Hakram, who had to bend his neck the slightest bit to avoid his head touching the ceiling of it.

"Catherine," the White Knight greeted me with a smile.

"Hanno," I replied, feeling my lips quirk the slightest bit.

It really was good to have him back. Even just sitting on a crate in a leather jerking, keeping an eye on his duckling, the dark-skinned man felt like an island of calm in a chaotic sea.

"I would greet you properly, Your Majesty, but I cannot stay my hand," the young girl apologized without turning.

And she was *young*, I saw. Scrawny and that dirty tunic she wore had seen better days, but for all that there was no denying the pulsing potency of the Light she was wielding to help my knight.

"You do me more courtesy by healing Brandon Talbot than a hundred curtsies would scrape together," I said. "White Knight?"

"Introductions can be seen to when her attention is not elsewhere demanded," Hanno said. "Though I wager you've other questions. I've news to give you, regardless."

"Do you now?" Hakram gravelled from behind me.

"Not so urgent as to need an intermediary, Adjutant," the White Knight told my second, unmoved.

The relationship between those two was best described as cordial dislike, though I'd never quite managed to put a finger on the source of it.

"What happened, Hanno?" I asked, cutting through the tension.

"After stumbling across one of the ghouls, I did what was necessary to flush out those in hiding before major damage could be done," he said. "Yet this was part of a greater scheme, Catherine. I've been speaking with Prince Klaus, and before coming here I met with the Peregrine."

My brow rose.

"Tell me," I ordered.

"The Order of the Red Lion confirmed that the dead were massing for an offensive until an hour ago," he said. "And now I fully understand why they gathered, and now no longer do."

"I don't suppose you intend to share at some point?" I drily replied.

He shot me an amused look.

"I found Pascale here," he said, gesturing towards the young girl, "with the help of the Valiant Champion after following up on a rumour that Tariq had been seen in the region."

I'd already made plain my feelings on that woman to the hero, so I saw no need to belabor the point by expressing the again now. Talk of the Pilgrim, though, sparked my interest. The Peregrine had lent his hand to none of the fronts, instead staying true to the roots of his Name and journeying wherever the Choir of Mercy deemed him to be most needed. If he'd really come here, then either we'd narrowly avoided a disaster or we were about to have one on our hands.

"It was a Revenant behind all of this," Hanno told me. "We named her the Plague-Maker, though besides her Praesi origins and talent in sorcery we know little of her."

"You found plague seeds as well," I breathed out.

"It was a scheme in two parts, as far as we can tell," the White Knight said. "First, after slipping through our defensive lines--"

"Which she shouldn't have fucking been able to do, Revenant or not," I bluntly said. "That's the reason we send the Augur all our oracles, so that she can warn us about shit like this."

"There was demonic taint on her," he told me. "Absence, Tariq believes, which might be why she blindsided us. I do not know when the Dead King might have found such a Named-"

"I do," I replied. "And if it's from when I believe, she's not the last one he'll have in store."

Malicia herself had once told me that Dread Empress Maleficent II had used demons of absence to avert the disastrous consequences of the three Secret Wars, for after failed invasions of the Serenity a counter-invasion of Ater by hellgate had been imminent. I couldn't know how many people the general who'd later become Dread Empress had throw to the dogs to avert utter calamity, but considering how ruthless Maleficent the Second had ended up being as a ruler I doubted that it'd be a small number. Hells, considering half the continent was fighting Keter these days and we were still slowly losing I couldn't even blame her.

"A discussion to be had later, then," the White Knight said. "Regardless, the undead plagues were meant to draw a significant fighting force south. A large force of zombies was massed around the Plague-Maker, hidden in the wilds, which I believe was meant to attack this very camp."

"The new ghouls were meant to hit our wards and leadership right before," I said.

"Exactly," Hanno nodded. "And, as a precaution, even if we won that battle handily we would be kept occupied by massive breakouts of the seeded plague in Brabant."

"Which we'd have to move to suppress, even as his armies took a swing at the northern defence line," I muttered.

It'd been, I thought, a pretty good plan. And it ought to have scrapped this summer as a season for an offensive war even if it didn't go entirely his way, all at the price of at most a single Revenant.

"You caught the Plague-Maker first, I take it," I said.

"Tariq found her in a western crossroads town, seeding refugee caravans passing through," Hanno said. "Rafaella and I caught up with him just as the confrontation began."

My eyes flicked to the young girl who was, by the looks of it, checking on Talbot's eye one last time before declaring him healed.

"That is where we found Pascale," Hanno agreed. "She'd caught on to the Plague-Maker's work."

I felt my hackles raise, though I wasn't quite sure why.

"Hale as you might hope to be, Sir Brandon," the girl – Pascale, apparently – smiled. "I am finished, if it pleases you."

"You have my most sincere thanks, Lady Apostle," the Grandmaster replied, rising to his feet. "If there is anything I can do to repay you-"

"I have already been repaid," the girl said, "in the only way that matters."

He bowed to her anyway, for he was a decent man, and offered to give me a report even as he put on a shirt before I bluntly told him to sleep off his healing and find me on the morrow. My shoulders were still tense, and I was not quite sure why. Hakram hovered close behind me, having picked up on my discomfort but being as confused as to the source of it as I was.

"I take it the Grey Pilgrim did as the Grey Pilgrim does," I said, getting the conversation going again.

"He stepped in to protect me, when I tried to heal the plague," Pascale happily told me. "My Choosing had already happened, but it is not suited to strife and I was most distressed."

"He drove the Revenant off and we caught her as she tried to escape," Hanno elaborated. "She called on the undead she'd been gathering, but we held them off long enough for the pilgrim's star to shine."

Meaning Tariq had smote into the ground what must have been at least a few hundred zombies but most likely had been a few thousand. It was easy to forget how fucking terrifying Tariq Fleetfoot could be, when he had the right story had his back.

"Lucky us you'd learned enough of the Light by then to pick up on the plague," I warmly told the girl.

She blushed.

"I had not, Your Majesty," she admitted. "My father was a wizard, who taught me of the Three Tells and the Seven Essences. Yet even so, magic would have failed. Yet my prayers were answered by Above, in our hour of need."

"You are," I slowly said, "a mage."

"I was," the young girl told me with an elated smile. "When I became the Stalwart Apostle the sorcery vanished from my veins, and the Light finally answered my prayers."

A crack resounded in the room. It had, I dimly realized, come from my staff. My grip had been too tight around it.

"Did they listen to you?" I quietly asked. "When you warned them about the plague?"

I felt the White Knight's heavy gaze on me but did not meet in. I looked only at this slip of a girl, who was so smilingly alive where the boy was dead.

"They did not," Pascale sadly said. "But the Heavens did, when I knelt and asked for guidance. And through the Light, I found the way to dissolve the plague."

This was, I told myself, nothing I should not have expected. A Named – or close enough – in the service of Evil, had been sowing death and preparing to bring about a great woe. It was only natural for the Heavens to put together a Named meant to end those designs, as the girl clearly had been.

"Ninety-nine times out of a hundred," I said, voice cold, "nine hundred and ninety-nine times out of a thousand, that *act of faith* would have killed dozens of thousands."

The girl looked like I'd struck her.

"Catherine," the White Knight warned me.

My fingers clenched tighter still around the staff of yew, death made into a marching stick. He'd been a wretched boy, Tancred, but he'd not been *wrong*. To act instead of pray, to trust his the ugly work of his hands rather than the silent Heavens. How many thousands, hundreds of thousands, *millions* had stood in this girl's place over the centuries and seen their faith rewarded only by a grisly death? No, the Scorched Apostate had not been wrong. He'd not been Chosen either, he'd done his own choosing. And the Heavens had damned him for it, so damn the presumptuous fucks for that in turn. Hakram's hand warmed my shoulder and I closed my eyes for a long moment.

"It's been a long day," I finally said. "We'll speak tomorrow."

There was a reason I was more than halfway fond of Hanno of Arwad: he looked at me for a heartbeat the nodded.

"Tomorrow," the White Knight softly agreed, eyes considering.

I walked out of the tent and into the night, Hakram hastening to catch up.

Tancred had not been wrong, I thought, shoulders tight and teeth gritted.

But what did that matter, when he was dead?

Chapter 7: Approach

"Friend and foe know a different man."

– Helikean saying

The contents of my tent were one of the few splurges of luxury I'd ever allowed myself. The bed was from Orense, whose carpenters were famous even within the Principate, and though it could be folded in two for transport it was nothing like the cots the Legions of Terror used as their standard. It was large enough for two and topped by a good woolen mattress, as even now featherbeds were just too soft for me – I found it difficult to fall asleep in them. A pair of enchanted braziers and a set of magelight lanterns saw to heat and light, while a small sculpted table flanked by a library-box and a few trunks held my personal affairs. That part of my tent was parted from the rest by a heavy curtain sown into the ceiling, keeping it separate from the larger segment where I received others.

The broad desk, which I'd had carved out of Ashuran cedar twice struck by lightning to my exact specifications, had been was the great expense there though I believed it worth ever copper. It'd been Akua that had told me about the cleansing and healing properties of the cedar trees that grew in the shade of Mount Tyro, the mountain where the mage-doctor schools of Ashur had first been raised centuries ago. Masego had added that a lightning strike would bring such properties to the surface, and Vivienne's people in the Free Cities had found cedar that'd been struck twice being sold by a broker in Mercantis. Whatever the magic behind it, sitting at that desk never seemed to pain my leg no matter how long I did and I tired measurably slower working on it.

The seat behind was naturally the same sinfully comfortable armchair I'd stolen from a Summer count during the Arcadian campaign, my perennial favourite. A pair of less comfortable but prettily sculpted – roaring lionheads for the arms – seats sent to me by Vivienne matched it on the other side. My personal desk was only a part of the large tent, however, as it'd become inevitable that I would have to frequently 'entertain' the kind of people who expected luxuries even when at war. The first wooden table I'd used was hacked straight through during either the fourth or fifth assassination attempt of last winter – I couldn't quite recall, they rather melded into the same general sense of unpleasantness after a while – and the replacement had only lasted two months before I put the Bandit Lord's head through it, but Archer had been sufficiently amused by that last setback she'd actually carved me one herself.

That oaken stretch was the single most beautiful thing I owned, as far as I was concerned. Though it was broadly rectangular and the surface was still only half-polished, Indrani must have put

half a hundred hours into the carvings that adorned it. Four snakelike legs coiled their way up, jaws opened to swallow legionaries as had truly happened when Akua unleashed devils on the Fifteenth before the Battle of Marchford. From there Archer had carved scenes as her fancy struck, without rhyme or reason. The Woe's battle with the Princess of High Noon abutted depiction of the duelling scene from the Lay of Lothian's Passing she so enjoyed, the last moments of Larat's splendid escape were wedged in between the dying gasp of the Kingdom of Sephirah and the view of the Silver Lake from her favourite Laure tavern.

It wasn't finished, perhaps only two thirds of the sides having been carved and the wood atop the table still being prepared for carvings of its own, and already it was one of the most precious possessions I'd ever owned. My officers and allies had quickly caught on to Indrani's habit of adding a few carvings whenever she passed through our camp, and it'd become a manner of entertainment for them to make a pretext to visit my tent and try to find the latest additions afterwards. The First Prince had sent a set of ten cushioned seats in matching oak as a gift, which given their delicate craftsmanship were likely worth a fortune, but coin couldn't buy what it had meant for someone as restless as Archer to have spent so many hours working on a piece meant for me.

There were other adornments to the tent, of course. Heavy tapestries hung from the sides, woven in the Callowan manner – the Hedges style, to be precise, since the thickness of those helped keep the heat in the tent during winter. My people's tapestries admittedly tended to only depict three things: hunting, the Book of All Things and war. Given that I had little taste for hunting or the Gods Above but more than a few wars under my belt, I'd settled for the last and matched that martial tendency with the grand maps I'd commissioned. Smaller ones of the fronts in Cleves and Twilight's Pass, larger ones of the Principality of Hainaut and the Kingdom of the Dead. Braziers, sprite-lanterns and a long commode that was admittedly mostly a dump for scroll and parchment stacks – as well as holding a pair of compartments filled with bottles of wine and liquor – finished the last of it.

It was a comfortable dwelling, as had been made necessary by the sheer amount of time I'd spent in it over the last two years.

I rose with dawn and broke my fast on the carved table, wolfing down eggs and rashers as I read through the damage reports from last night's troubles. Akua sat across from me and we shared a pot of tea in companionable silence as I busied myself frowning at the ink. Most of the damage was superficial but one of the wardstones from the Third Army's camp, which was where the Dead King's ghouls had found the most success, had cracked. This was not beyond our ability to fix, but the artefact the ghouls has

used to try to contaminate the stone – some sort of sharp obsidian spike that just reeked of sorcery – was still stuck in it. It'd have to be either destroyed or extracted. In destroying it we'd improve our chances of repairing the wardstone, but to extract it we'd have to cut through the stone instead and effectively wreck it permanently. On the other hand, if we could figure out what the spike was we could prepare countermeasures for its next use.

Adjutant joined us just as I finished reading the last of the report, his timing as fatefully impeccable as always, and he claimed a seat at a table. He demurred when Akua offered him a cup of tea, as they'd both known he would. He hated the Nok blends, insisted they made his fangs taste of herbs for days afterwards. Akua had not once, so far, missed an occasion to try to socially maneuver him into being forced to drink a cup regardless. It was easy to tell how well they were getting along on any given day simply by how playful the shade was being about that little game. This morning, though, I gave them no time to get into it.

"Thoughts?" I prompted.

"It's only the wardstone against scrying that was affected," Hakram calmly said. "The least important of the three. Carve it, send the spike to the Belfry and lean on the Arsenal to get a replacement sent as soon as possible."

My eyes moved to Akua.

"Destroy the spike," the dark-skinned woman replied. "It costs us more than weeks or months exposed to destroy a wardstone: it also costs us the hours spent realigning the array with the replacement stone. Hours that skilled mages would otherwise spend addressing current threats or preparing for those to come."

"The Dead King seemingly believed he could sink our full ward array with the spike, Lady Akua," Hakram pointed out. "If we do not learn the nature of the threat, that might just be the case when one is next used against us."

"The Dead King has millennia of such accumulated tricks and tools to wield whenever he so pleases, Lord Adjutant," Akua replied. "We cannot and indeed should not attempt to match every single blow with an exact parrying dagger. The superior approach would be tightening security around our wardstones and instead leaning our efforts towards innovations of our own."

"Our innovations spring from Jaquinite and Trismegistan sorcery," Adjutant gravelled. "One was forged in the Dead King's shadow and he is the founding practitioner of the other. We might as well try to drown a shark."

"However potent a practitioner of sorcery, the King of Death remains a single mage," the shade argued. "While he can have helpers and acquire the knowledge of others, it is highly improbable for the Dead King's mastery of the Gift to be so superior as to eclipse every advance come out of the Arsenal."

I drummed my fingers against the table, thinking in silence. The two of them were, through the locus of an ultimately minor tactical decision, coming to stand in for the two great currents of thought among the strategists of the Grand Alliance. One school of thought, of which the most prominent advocates were Princess Rozala Malanza and Prince Otto Reitzenberg, argued that the Alliance should fight aggressively on a tactical scale but defensively on a strategic one. Stable defensive lines and regular sorties were to serve as way to grind down Keter's forces in Procer while the Empire Ever Dark held Serolen and raided through dwarven tunnels behind the lines of the dead. All of this was to serve as a method of weakening the Dead King until either the Arsenal created armaments capable of turning the tide or a strategic opportunity to strike at Keter itself was made. The ever-increasing amount of Named joining our ranks had, of late, been added to the arguments. Defence was their creed, until we took the King of Death's head in his seat of his power.

The other school of thought, which claimed Prince Klaus Papenheim and Lord Yannu Marave as leading lights, argued instead for full offensive war. Their belief was that the Grand Alliance would soon reach the peak of its capacity to wage war and would only be headed into a death spiral if it did not begin scoring decisive blows before that capacity was spent. The doctrine would begin with reclamation of northern Procer by three-pointed offensive, followed by a winter of preparation and then a joint all-fronts offensive into the Kingdom of the Dead while the Empire Ever Dark struck out from its position in Serolen. With enough victories to show for, we could bargain for open dwarven military support and offer them a clean strike at Keter while the Hidden Horror's armies were tied up on four different campaigns in other corners of his realm. There were half a dozen other variations on how the offensives should be waged, some of them not even involving the Kingdom Under, but the common tie was always the call for offensive campaigning.

Akua was, I knew, very much inclined to agree with the defensive school. Like most Praesi highborn she still saw mages at the most important part of warfare and was generally inclined to believe Named were best suited to creating the kind of breakthrough that'd deliver victory against Keter, either in a study or on the field. Hakram was not quite so clear-cut in his preferences, but for good reason his sympathies tended more the way of the offensive school. While Akua was hardly uninformed, she was not nearly as aware of how fragile the Grand Alliance's situation truly was as my second. The strain of the war against Keter was

being felt across the entire coalition, but most keenly of all in Procer: high taxes, frequent requisitions and lasting restrictions on trade were causing mounting unrest. And that was without even mentioning the waves of refugees in need of settling, for whom sympathy tended to sour very quickly whenever food or room ran low and human nature took its usual course towards the ugly. Hakram tended to favour the aggressive approaches, including getting ready to fight the war *now*, because he was unsure how long we could keep waging it.

I leaned more towards the offensive school myself, as it happened, but only within limits. The Principality of Hainaut and the last stretches of Twilight's Pass ought to be reclaimed in full and a proper defensive line raised across all shores that'd be able to prevent large-scale invasion by the dead. Then, and only then, could further aggressive campaigning be considered. Cordelia Hasenbach agreed, as it happened, at least when it came to the reclamation of Hainaut – she was less eager to try taking back the Pass once more, considering the lair of nightmares Neshamah had turned the last fortresses of it into. Regardless, the two of us agreeing and the Grey Pilgrim not opposing us meant that a summer offensive into northern Hainaut was a certainty unless disaster struck beforehand.

As it nearly had, with that seeded plague. We were not unexpected or unseen in our designs.

"Do either of you have anything else to add?" I finally said.

"Our armies will be headed north, to the warded fortresses of the defensive line," Hakram said. "We can afford the window of vulnerability while we replace the stone."

"Expanding the ritual repertoire of our mage cadres would be more efficient a use of their time, and the potential gains from breaking the wardstone are limited," Akua calmly replied.

I sharply nodded, fingers withdrawing from the table. As things currently stood the scrying ward was incontinent but not outright broken, so while the choice shouldn't be dragged out it did not need to be made immediately either.

"I'll have a decision by Evening Bell," I said. "Hakram, what have you got for me?"

"You intended on speaking with the soldiers and officers from the assault formation," the orc reminded me. "Assembly can be had at half an hour's notice. Reports will be coming in by the Alliance scrying network at Noon Bell, including Vivienne's. Lady Aquiline and Lord Razin seek an audience, as does the White Knight."

He paused for a beat.

"Nestor Ikaroi of the Secretariat arrived during the night as well," he added. "Along with his usual scribes. He requested audience as well, and mentioned he'd been charged with diplomatic correspondence meant for you."

My eyebrow rose. I did not ask from who – if he'd known, he would have told me – but it was not from lack of curiosity.

"I've the usual disciplinary action and assignment summaries for the Third Army for you to review," Hakram added, moving on to more mundane matters. "As well as the patrol and guard roster suggestions for the coming month."

The latter parchments could not be passed on to anyone else, since if they did not have my authority behind them those suggestions would be balked at by our rowdy collation of Proceran, Levantine and Callowan captains. They'd need another read, anyway, to see if someone had tried to favour their own again. The former, though...

"You don't need to bring me the Third Army summaries anymore," I grunted. "General Abigail doesn't need me looking over her shoulder."

He flicked a considering glance at Akua, whose face was serene as a pond as she drank from her cup of tea. I did not bother to hide my irritation at that when his gaze returned to me, and he clicked his fangs apologetically.

"I doubt she'd agree if asked," Adjutant said. "I'll see to it regardless."

I hummed, sipping at my own cup thoughtfully.

"Send for Secretary Nestor first," I decided.

The Blood could wait, it'd do them some good, and when Hanno came by for our chat I'd rather have it with a drink in hand. Past Noon Bell, then, which wasn't a bad idea anyway. Though the White Knight did not get reports the way I did, relying on the First Prince for information on that scale, he did correspond with a great many heroes who, as heroes were wont to, found out all sorts of hidden things. Often what he learned there was little better than gossip, but on occasion there was treasure buried among the dross. Akua took her leave without needing to be prompted, heading out to organize the repairs of the lesser damage on the wardstones. Though Senior Mage Dastardly was still the ranking mage of the Third Army, he was suborned to Akua's authority as the informal commander of our coalition's mage cadres. Both the Proceran wizards and the Levantine binders – those Abigail hadn't slaughtered like lambs, anyway – took orders from her as well, within certain limits.

From experience I knew Secretary Nestor Ikaroi would be awake even at this hour, as the Delosi *askretis* hardly ever slept even at his advanced age. I was, it had to be said, rather fond of the man. He was polite, useful and his dedication to recording history accurately bordered on being principled. It was therefore with a smile that I greeted him when Hakram ushered him into the tent, half-rising from the desk where I'd migrated before inviting him to sit across. He did so after a slight bow, the shallowness of it as much a reminder of his high status in Delos as the two stripes tattooed across each of his cheeks. One black and one blue, traditionally the highest rank one could rise to within the Secretariat.

"Queen Catherine," he greeted me. "I thank you for the audience, and twice over of your promptness in granting it."

Ikaroi's long white hair was kept in a clean ponytail and his grooming was impeccable even so early, something made clear by his turning back to gesture for an attendant scribe to approach. A scroll case was passed to the Secretary, who in turn passed it to Hakram. Considering the last time someone from the Free Cities had tried to hand me something directly it'd been an assassination attempt, that particular bit of decorum had grown on me.

"The Secretariat has proved a good friend, if not outright an ally," I replied. "It's my pleasure to return the courtesy."

I glanced at the scroll case Adjutant had taken in hand but not opened.

"Although it seems that this time we aren't to discuss the submission of questions," I added.

"In truth the Secretariat has also passed along a list of inquiries, along with making funds available to me," the blue-eyed man noted.

Good news, that. The Grand Alliance's war machine was ever hungry for coin.

"Anything interesting?" I idly asked.

"Secretary Thais stills seeks to prove her theories on the source of the Stygian Spring, so a perspective in attendance of the Violet Peace's signing has been requested," he replied.

I snorted. Secretary Thais remained convinced that a secret treaty had been signed between Nicae and Stygia beyond the officially recorded peacemaking, and that it was exactly such a secret that'd allowed the Magisterium to begin aggressive attacks against Delos and Atalante a few centuries back. That assertion had yet to have even a slight indication of being historically

accurate but if the old woman was willing to sink a fortune in being proved wrong, I had no objection.

"A question on Callowan history as well, for the Annals," Nestor Ikaroi said. "Seeking to ascertain if Queen Yolanda the Stern's was a villain in metaphysical sense or a merely a political one."

I hummed thoughtfully.

"Actually, I wouldn't mind knowing that as well," I admitted.

Callowan historians still debated to this day if Yolanda the Wicked had truly been one of Below's or just Proceran-born and deeply despised, but I'd never cared much either way. It was ancient history, and not the sort I need be concerned about. On the other hand, if she'd truly been a villainous Named then it occurred to me there was precedent for one of those reigning as Queen of Callow for more than a decade. While I didn't particularly want my reign to be painted with the same brush as a woman I'd once seen written of as 'barely more popular than the plague', it could serve as the foundation for a legal argument. One that lent my rule a little more legitimacy than that of a victorious warlord. That wasn't much of an issue for me, these days – not unless I started losing battles anyway – but if I didn't want Vivienne or her successors fighting a civil in twenty years then we needed a better arguments than brute force and wearing a fancy hat.

"Usual rates, you know the drill by now. I'll be speaking with the White Knight later this evening, so I'll see when it can be done," I told Nestor. "The list?"

"Timo, if you would?" the old man asked.

The young scribe passed a neatly folded parchment to Hakram. Usually the Secretariat only sent ten questions at a time, which I'd been informed by the Jacks were the subject of much internal politicking between the upper ranks of their bureaucratic ruling class. This entire affair had begun when Hanno, early into the first Hainaut offensive, had offered during an idle conversation to use his Recall aspect in order to settle a question about the size of the armies at the Battle of Lerna as recoded in the Annals. The askretis had gone wild at the potential resource that was having access to the memories of thousands of heroes going centuries back, the Secretariat even lodging a formal request with the Grand Alliance to consult with the White Knight over historical matters only to be reluctantly informed by Cordelia that the Sword of Judgement was not hers to 'lend'.

So they'd gone to Hanno himself, who like a complete chump would have simply answered their questions whenever time allowed and thought nothing more of it. Gods, *heroes*. It showed most of them had never had to handle a treasury, much less fund a war. So I'd

had a private word with him and we'd emerged from that conversation with practical prices in coin if the Secretariat wanted to take advantage of an opportunity that might never come to them again. Most the gold went into the Grand Alliance's coffers, because Hanno was Hanno, but I'd insisted he take a cut even if he ended up spending it on other people. These days the Delosi tended to bring the questions to me, since I was often easier to find, and strangely enough he seemed to prefer it that way. Hakram set the parchment bearing the questions aside on my commode and returned to hand me the leather scroll case after having inspected it thoroughly.

"I don't suppose you know what's in that," I asked the Delosi.

"I have my suspicions," Secretary Nestor said, "but cannot know for certain. I know only that General Basilia meant it for your hand."

Yeah, I'd thought it might be from her. The woman who'd once been Kairos Theodosian's favourite general was arguably the closest thing I – and the Grand Alliance at large – had to an ally in the Free Cities, sad as it was to say. I broke open to seal and fished out the scroll, unfurling it carefully. Though the courtesies were curt they were still present, followed by a few matter of fact sentences about her latest victories on the field. The part that caught my attention, however, was right afterwards.

"Stygia's getting involved," I summarized. "One of the Helikean patrols caught some of the Magisterium's people bringing wagons of arms onto a ship whose captain was headed for Nicae."

Secretary Nestor dipped his head, seemingly unsurprised.

"It is the Secretariat's belief that the Magisterium seeks to prolong the war as much as possible," the old man said. "So long as Basileus Leo holds the city and Strategos Zenobia holds the countryside, Nicae remains divided. It is so with General Basilia's campaigns in Penthesian lands as well. Our archivist-oracles believe they will not hinder transport of supplies so long as no decisive victory is scored, but would begin sabotage immediately if General Basilia succeeded at forcing such an engagement."

Which she hadn't, and likely wouldn't. Exarch Prodocius still held on to the throne he'd won by virtue of being the last puppet standing, but his authority hardly went beyond the walls of Penthes itself. Many towns and tributary cities had declared him usurper and unfit – moved either by genuine outrage or by the very real chance of being sacked by Helike should they not – but his control on the city-state itself and a few key fortresses had not been shaken. Malicia was propping him up, if rumours of warlock 'diplomats' having joined his court were true, but for all that he was a pawn the man was not a complete fool. General

Basilia's army had chewed through every Penthesian field army sent its way and taken lesser walls, but Helike did not have the siege weaponry or mages to take the city of Penthes itself. The Exarch would remain holed up behind his tall walls with the last of his armies, trying to wait out Basilia.

"For Stygia to interfere with a supply line that passes through Delosi territory might taken by some as an act of war," I mildly said.

"The Magisterium has not done such a thing," Secretary Nestor serenely replied. "The worse that can be laid at its feet is words."

I could read between the lines. The Magisters had spoken words so the Secretariat was being forthcoming with those as well, tacitly passing information to the Grand Alliance through me. It wasn't willing to escalate any further unless Stygia did first, though, their precious neutrality remaining in place. They could have gone to the First Prince with this instead, but by going to me they could better claim to have maintained an impartial approach: General Basilia was already sending me information, and Callow's openly hostile relations with Dread Empress Malicia meant I could be said to have a legitimate stake in the war. *They're not helping a foreigner against the League*, I sardonically thought, *they're helping Helike's almost-ally against Stygia's almost-ally. With a few added steps and tortured justifications, no doubt.*

"One would think that Malicia would advise against Stygian ambitions, given the civil war she's fighting," I complained. "But it's never that simple, is it?"

"Dread Empress Sepulchral has failed to gather support beyond the initial wave," the old man shrugged. "She is a threat, to be sure, but for all her clever maneuvering she has not beaten the Legions."

"The part of those that still fight for the Tower, anyway," I replied, bit bothering to hide my relish.

Though Malicia had seized the rebel old guard of Black loyalists that'd refused to bend the knee and even crucified a few, she'd underestimated both how popular my father was with the rank and file and how badly the revelation her sorcerous mind control would be received by greenskin officers. Nearly half of the former Legions-in-Exile had deserted her service at the first opportunity. A few of those joined up with Sepulchral's armies, but most had either thrown down their weapons or joined the ever-growing camp of disaffected soldiers on the edge of the Green Stretch. While Sepulchral's – once known as High Lady Abreha Mireembe – own High Seat of Aksum had followed her into rebellion

and Nok had declared for her as well, most of Praes still remained in Malicia's hands.

She'd not managed to dislodge Sepulchral, though, despite Marshal Nim's best efforts, and knowledge that the Grand Alliance had opened negotiations with the rival claimant to the Tower ought to have curbed her willingness to provoke us even through surrogates. Evidently not, though. Now if only Black would come out of the woodworks – or acknowledge he was behind Dread Empress Sepulchral, as many suspected he might be – this entire nest of snakes could be put to rest. But for some reason he'd yet to tip his hand.

"Praesi will do as Praesi have always done," Secretary Nestor said, unconcerned. "It is nothing to Delos. Yet, Queen Catherine, if I might give a word of warning?"

My eyes sharpened. Not a word the man would use lightly, that.

"I'm listening," I said.

"There are strange undercurrents in Mercantis, these days," the old man warned. "Ones even the eyes and ears of the Secretariat cannot quite parse."

I kept my dismay off my face. The City of Bought and Sold was a pack of despicable profiteers, there was no denying that, yet so far they'd known how to toe the line of how much they should attempt to profit. The wealth of Mercantis' banks and merchant lords had been instrumental in keeping the Principate's industry from collapsing as the strain of curtailed trade and heavy taxes took its toll, but the city-state was almost as useful as broker capable of obtaining materials and rarities for the Arsenal. If they turned on us now, it'd be a crippling blow. Yet I couldn't quite believe even the famously avaricious merchant lords would be this foolish. What would their gold be worth, when the Dead King was at their gates? And if they pressed us now, they had to know that should we win the Grand Alliance's fury would be a black thing to behold.

"Thank you for the advice," I said, tone forcibly calm.

I'd have to speak with Cordelia, soon. She was the foremost diplomat of the Grand Alliance, by both talent and station, and I was still astounded she'd somehow managed to talk both Atalante and Delos into allowing the Helikean armies and supply train to pass their through territory. Last I'd heard from Vivienne the First Prince was looking into bringing Strategos Zenobia into the Grand Alliance's orbit without angering her current patron General Basilia in the process, so she ought to have been keeping an eye on the region. If something was going wrong with Mercantis it was Hasenbach that'd be noticing the signs, and likely she who'd have to fix it anyway. If this was a ploy from Malicia,

though, that'd make two provocations from her: Stygia's growing interventionism and trying to strike at our finances. The Tower would be, to be blunt, picking a fight. If we didn't answer her in kind she'd only grow bolder, too, and that simply couldn't be allowed. On the other hand, we could hardly afford to send an army Praes' way could we?

There was no easy answer to this, as tended to be the way when dealing with Dread Empress Malicia.

"I trouble you no longer, then, Your Majesty," the old askretis said, rising only to offer another slight bow.

"Always a pleasure, Secretary Nestor," I simply replied.

I slumped into my seat, after the old man and his attendant had left. And this, I thought, had been meant to be the *pleasant* part of my day. Adjutant stood in silence at my side, close but not reaching out.

"All right," I sighed, opening my eyes. "Get me those rosters, Hakram. Let's get this done before some other looming disaster appears on the horizon."

One thing at a time. It could be done, if we did it one thing at a time.

I told myself I believed that, straightened my back and got to work.

Chapter 8: Stanchion

"Friendship is as a garden: taking years to flourish, unmade by a season's negligence."

– Proceran saying

Neat rows of legionaries in polished armour stood in resounding silence as Zombie passed in front of them at a trot.

The three hundred men and women making up the assault formation that'd performed so well against the zombies yesterday – for all that the small victory had since been drowned out by bitterer defeats – had already been praised by their commander, Tribune Algernon Beesbury, and even been commended by Adjutant earlier. Hakram had also taken care to speak with the rank and file, asking what about the assault formation they felt had functioned properly and not, then passed along their answers put to ink to consider. I'd taken a glance, and while I'd read it properly later my glimpse had mostly told me the legionaries were satisfied in most respects, save that they were clamouring for more hammers. The raven beaks, as they were called, tended to be better at putting down dead than the halberds even if they lacked

the flexibility of the other polearms. Reconsidering the proportions of each might be in order, though if thinned by too much the halberds would lose much of their effectiveness.

I gazed at the legionaries as I rode past them, most of the helmeted faces unfamiliar to me even after holding command in Hainaut for so long. Perhaps I ought not to be surprised, as most of these soldiers came from General Hune's command and I did tend to stay with the Third Army rather than the Second. Its soldiers and officers were not as familiar to me, as much a single woman could ever be said to be familiar with an army. A few faces among these I'd seen before, if not put a name to, but it was some time before I pulled the reins to end Zombie's stride. The leathery grey-green skin I was glimpsing through the lieutenant's open helm stirred my memory, as did the vivid red scar cutting across the face of the orc.

"I know you," I mused. "Second Liesse?"

"Yes, Warlord," she grinned, showing teeth. "I was only a legionary, then. Fresh to the Fifteenth."

I tapped a finger below my eye, mirroring the jagged bend of the red line under hers.

"Seasoned now," I replied approvingly. "That was made by wight teeth or I'll eat my hand, Lieutenant..."

"Gunborg," she proudly said, "of the Howling Wolves Clan."

Hakram's clan, that, and Marshal Grem One Eye's as well. She must have been in one of the last batches of recruits we got from the Steppes before the Empress stripped the Fifteenth of its recruitment rights.

"One of them slipped in below my shield and bit me, Warlord," Lieutenant Gunborg said, then grinned nastily. "But I bit *back*."

I couldn't help but grin in answer. There was something about that iron-cast martial pride that served as the backbone of the Clans that'd always rung true with me. There were parts of what came with being an orc that I'd never truly be able to understand, but the pride? I'd partaken of it eagerly, as a young girl. It'd done more to bind me to the Dread Empire than any conversation I'd ever had to Malicia.

"Looks like you got the better end of that trade, lieutenant," I laughed. "But polish your shieldwork a bit, would you? When I see you make captain, I'd prefer you not to be missing any bits."

"You have my oath, Warlord," she solemnly assured me.

With a last chuckle I set Zombie back to her walk, passing the rest of the full first rank without seeing another old comrade. At the end of the line Tribune Beesbury was waiting, a young dark-haired man with surprisingly gentle brown eyes. With the pretty curls and the delicate face, he looked more like a poet than an officer of my armies. Until one got a look at the callouses on his hands, anyway: those didn't come from quillwork.

"Tribune Beesbury," I said, pitching my voice so it could be heard as far as the back. "I appointed you to lead these assault companies while knowing little of you, because you were warmly recommended to me by General Hune and endorsed by Hakram Deadhand."

I let a moment pass.

"You have lived up to every word spoken in your praise," I said.

Though he had good mastery of his face, for one his age, he was no courtier. The flush of pleasure and brightened eyes let me know of his thoughts even as he tried to keep them from showing.

"You do me honour, Your Majesty," Tribune Beesbury replied.

I shook my head.

"You do us all honour," I said, voice rising as I turned to the assembled legionaries. "Assault formations like yours were untested, until yesterday, but you fought with prowess that cannot be denied. *Not a single fatality!*"

I roared out the last sentence and got a roar back in return. It was not as great a victory as I was making it sound, in truth, since zombies were the least of the dead and numbers had only been slightly larger on Keter's side. There'd been a score wounded, and without the House Insurgent there would have been two dead, but the performance had still been very promising. Enough that I was willing to invest time and coin into training legionaries in this method of making war even if was not backed by another ruler in the effort. I raised a hand and the cacophony went down, leaving me free to speak again.

"As a reward for your conduct in yesterday's skirmish, I've ordered ale and meat rations be opened to all of you for supper," I called out. "You sent the dead back to their graves, legionaries – fill your bellies tonight, and dream of doing it again!"

Cheers filled the air again, even louder than last time, and my name was even called out by some. It wasn't my finest bit of speaking, truth be told, but I'd given so many of these speeches lately I couldn't even remember how many this made. They couldn't all be fresh and stirring. Besides, ale and meat would get people

cheering even if they'd come with a sermon instead of the praise I'd freely doled out. A celebration, even a small one, ought to lift some of the pall of uncertainty that'd fallen over the camp since yesterday. Hanno had caught the Enemy in time, so spirits had not taken too hard a hit, but the revelation of the existence of shapeshifting ghouls had everyone distrustful and uneasy. I had a word with the senior officers of the formation, committing names and faces to memory, but did not linger long. Razin and Aquiline ought to have been sent for by now, unless Hakram had lost his touch, so I passed Zombie's reins to a legionary and limped back to my tent.

The first hint that something was off came in the shape of a full line of legionaries whose pauldrons bore a distinctive scorched mark in the shape of a skeletal hand. Adjutant's personal command, those, grown from a single tenth when I was still the Squire to a full cohort of two hundred now. The sight of them around camp was hardly unusual, but that twenty would be standing almost skittishly around my tent most definitely was. The lieutenant in charge saluted when I approached and I hobbled up to him, about to ask the reason for this reinforced guard when my tent's entrance curtain was parted open. Hakram strolled out, leathery face offering up only forced calm.

"There has been a misunderstanding, Catherine," Adjutant said. "If you'd only give me a few moments I'll-"

My pulse quickened. Not from danger, but from something else I couldn't quite parse yet. I'd been meant to sit with the Blood, hadn't I? There were only so many people from their corner of the world that my second be struggling to prevent my talking with.

"Hakram," I blandly interrupted. "Who's in the tent?"

His face fell into an apologetic grimace, head angling to the side in an unconscious display of apology. Without another word I passed by him, staff forcing aside the curtain, and I felt my fingers clench in a spasm. Around the table Indrani was still carving me, four people were seated. Lord Razin Tanja and Lady Aquiline Osen were those who'd requested audience of me, but the other two were uninvited guests. The Barrow Sword's presence I had no real issue with. Ishaq might insist on continuing to wear the ancient bronze scale suit for reasons dubious to me, but the equally bronze sword he'd stolen from an old barrow along with the armour was a vicious piece of work especially well-suited to dealing with Revenants. The way he was rather easy on the eyes – though I remained skeptical of beards, even well-groomed ones – and had been a solid partisan of mine since we'd established the pecking order meant I tended to be well-inclined towards him.

Oh, he was still a ruthless and largely amoral bastard who'd once tried to kill me just for the perks it'd earn him among his people. Yet, compared to some of the villains I had to deal with,

he was agreeably straightforward in his intentions. It was the last of the four that had my lips thinning in barely mastered anger. The Valiant Champions' name was, I'd been told, Rafaella. I'd never used it before, and did not intend to ever start. Short and stocky with a long braid going down her back, the Champion was the savage sort of cheerful that I might have appreciated in someone who hadn't *fucking skinned Captain and worn her fur as a cape*. My eyes flicked towards the tanned 'heroine', who gazed back without either fear or embarrassment.

"Walk out of this tent," I ordered in Chantant, tone eerily calm.

Hakram entered behind me and I could almost feel him wincing as Lady Aquiline opened her mouth.

"Queen Catherine, she is here at our-"

I'd coddled those kids too much, hadn't I? I must have been for them to be so fucking *unafraid*. Night flooded my veins, singing back eagerly to the call of my boiling anger. The sprite-lanterns hanging from the strips of cloth crisscrossing my tent's ceiling shone bright in the deepening shadows that swallowed everything between them, the enchanted braziers flickering as if touched by wind. A small ball of air formed above my palm, spinning, and Aquiline Osen gasped at the absence of the breath I'd just taken from her. My eyes never left the Champion.

"Walk," I softly repeated, "out of this tent."

She did not want to. Anyone with eyes could have seen that. I'd not been deft or delicate in my dismissal, and for a woman as proud as she it would rankle to have to obey. But she was in my tent, and an uninvited guest, so with a scowl the Valiant Champion got to her feet. She strode out, heading to my right since to my left Adjutant was silently standing. As she passed me, I spoke up again.

"Don't forget my warning," I murmured without looking at her. "If you ever wear that cloak again, even far from this camp, *I'll know*."

She left the tent without giving reply, showing she was not entirely a fool. The Barrow Sword's soft, pleased laughter escorted her out. I loosened my grip on my anger, the shadows that'd swallowed up the tent fading, and crushed the ball of breath within my fist. Lady Aquiline gasped out, her voice returned to her. Razin eyed me with open anger, hands falling to his sword, and whatever ire might have been found in his gaze was matched twice over by what lay in Aquiline's.

"You struck at-" she began.

"Bring Named into my tent uninvited again, Osená," I softly interrupted, "and you'll have to crawl on your belly to wherever Tariq's hiding for healing, your severed feet hanging around neck. Do you understand me?"

They both looked at me with fear and surprise. I'd been too soft on the pair of them, I thought, and now familiarity had bred contempt. They were in dire need of a reminder of who exactly they were dealing with.

"I asked," I hissed out, "*do you understand me?*"

The Lady of Tartessos' tanned face paled, as much from humiliation as fear.

"I understand, Queen Catherine," she replied through gritted teeth.

But the point hadn't quite sunk in, I mused. Maybe being made to stand for the rest of the audience would do them some good, or –

"Catherine," Hakram murmured in Kharsum. "There is discipline, and there is insult. Only one is warranted."

I breathed out shallowly. He was right, of course he was right. There was no point to further turning the knife in the wound save that vicious little twinge of satisfaction it'd give me. And that was no reason to do anything at all. I let the sudden fury that'd seized me flow out and limped around the table, going towards the head. Hakram pulled out my seat for me and I sat with my staff propped up against my shoulder, eyeing the lot of them a tad more calmly.

"Ishaq," I said, turning my steady stare to the Barrow Sword. "You, at least, ought to have known better than to bring Named uninvited into the quarters of a villain."

"I was unaware until the last moment," the bearded warrior replied, grinning crookedly. "Could have warned them, true, but then I wouldn't have gotten to see *that*."

He gestured a calloused hand the direction the Champion had left. Considering the Barrow Sword and Levantine heroes fought like cats and dogs whenever they were in the each other's vicinity, I had no trouble whatsoever believing he'd kept silent just to see me expel the other woman from my tent. I grunted, unamused, and turned my gaze back to the two Dominion aristocrats. They were both glaring at the villain, though that rolled off like water from a duck's back.

"You asked for an audience," I said, tone still clipped. "You have it. Speak."

"We come today to speak of the Barrow Sword," Lord Razin said, not bothering to hide his irritation towards the man in question. "Who has, once more, petitioned the Majilis and the Holy Seljun for his deeds to be recorded by the rolls."

The rolls were one of those peculiarities in the way the Dominion of Levant treated its Named. While there were highborn among the Levantines who were aristocrats purely because of their ancestry, they were ultimately all descended from Named and to their people that was the very source of being highborn. Coming into a Name would see one immediately raised to nobility, though like everywhere else on Calernia there were nobles and then there were *nobles*. There wasn't a lot of difference between someone like the Painted Knife and, say, a Callowan landed knight or a baronet. Often merchants were wealthier in everything but largely decorative privileges.

Bestowed, as they called their Named, were always either associated to one of the already existing lineages or, when unprecedented, entered in the rolls as the founder of their own line of the Blood. The rolls themselves, aside from serving as records of such lineages in 'Blood and Bestowal', held records of all the great deeds of Levantine Named. Those who were not villains, anyway, at least in theory. I personally believed that a few villains had slipped through the cracks by virtue of not openly keeping to Below or being tied to an originally heroic lineage in some way. It might even go deeper than that: some of the things I'd read had been done by the Vengeful Brigand, one of their founding heroes, had been genuinely nasty in a way not often seen out of the Wasteland.

The issue here, though, was that Ishaq was *openly* a villain. While undeniably Bestowed, he was effectively demanding he be made a noble by a country keeping to Above, one where men like him were expected to be the proving grounds of more honourable lines and nothing else. In other times he'd be laughed out of the room or ignored, should he not instead find the Grey Pilgrim politely knocking at his door one evening, but times were changing. The Liesse Accords stipulated that being a villain was not inherently a crime and, though the members of the Grand Alliance had not yet signed the Accords, the Truce and the Terms were widely seen as prelude and trial to their implementation.

It had been Cordelia Hasenbach's own notion to keep the two separate so that mistakes in one would not taint the other before it was implemented. I suspected I might have come to resent how damnably clever that woman was, if it weren't so damnably useful.

"Interesting," I mildly said. "Yet also a matter for the Dominion of Levant to resolve."

I mostly liked the Barrow Sword but I wasn't going to meddle in the brutal debacle that was Levantine politics on his behalf,

much less to try to force the raising of a villain to nobility. The backlash to such an act from, well, most everyone was likely to be spectacular.

"We came to request a clarification about the Truce and the Terms," Lady Aquiline said, visibly still fuming. "And how they would apply against a decree of the Majilis."

"The Majilis voted unanimously for the Dominion to sign onto the Truce and Terms," I pointed out, frowning. "There is no conflict to be had."

"There's the trouble, Black Queen. I have been given amnesty for grave-robbing by the Terms, and my Bestowal is not itself an offence against the laws of Levant," the Barrow Sword smiled. "So by the ancient laws of the Dominion, I must be added to the rolls as the founder of the Barrow's Blood."

"Those laws were written with the understand that Below's servants would be hunted by the righteous without protection," Aquiline flatly said.

I sucked in a breath.

"The Terms bend the meaning of your laws so that you no longer have grounds to refuse him," Adjutant said, voicing my realization.

The two of the Blood nodded, while the villain leaned back in his seat with a smirk. Hence the *clarification* that was being requested here. They wanted me, as speaker for the villain Named of the Grand Alliance, to make it clear that the Terms couldn't force their hand.

"The Holy Seljun has expressed his intention to call the Majilis to session and change the laws to reflect the will of the Heavens," Lord Razin said. "When informed of this, the Barrow Sword-"

"The Barrow Sword told them he'd have to lodge a complaint with his representative under the Terms should the Majilis, seated halfway across the continent, try to fuck him up the ass while he's fighting in the thick of the melee against the Dead King," Ishaq said, tone hardening.

Fuck, I grimly thought. So that was why they'd come to me even though this was a Dominion matter: I'd sworn oaths under the Terms to defend the Barrow Sword and settle complaints on his behalf. It was a thorny little predicament they were bringing to me, too. On one hand, if I twisted arms for Ishaq over this then the Black Queen was intervening in the Dominion's own affairs. That was the kind of overstep that shattered coalitions. On the other hand, if I just looked away and did nothing then I was

telling villains that I'd throw them under the horse the moment living up to my oaths became slightly inconvenient. That, and afterwards what Levantine villain would want to lend their power to the war if back home they were being forbidden by law the rights and privileges of other Named? Even those already fighting would think twice about keeping their oaths, if the Dominion scorned them so openly. That was the trouble, with making continent-spanning treaties: afterwards you had to deal with a continent's worth of trouble.

"To clarify," Hakram intervened, "no such complaint has been made, and no law was changed?"

"No," the Barrow Sword smilingly agreed.

"The Majilis has not yet been called," Lord Razin said. "Before the matter is to be debated, we meant to seek the insight of the Black Queen on this matter."

Meaning they wanted to know how hard I'd come out swinging for Ishaq before they made a decision that couldn't be easily walked back.

"I've also requested that a record of my deeds in Hainaut be sent to the Blood for consideration," the Barrow Sword added.

That much, at least, I had no qualms promising. Whatever the rest I'd not deny the man acknowledgement of the fierceness he'd fought against Keter with.

"That will have been put to ink and bear personal seal by dawn tomorrow," I said, flicking a meaningful glance at Hakram.

He'd be the one to write it, after all. From the rueful look in his eyes he'd understood my meaning perfectly.

"The Valiant Champion was meant to speak on this matter for Bestowed of the Dominion," Lady Aquiline told me, defiantly. "Before she was so unreasonably sent away."

"If Levantine heroes are to have a say in this dispute, that is a Dominion matter," I coldly replied. "Under the Terms, my interlocutor is the White Knight. I owe not an inch beyond that."

"How pettily you complain of another's trophy, while wearing many yourself," the Lady of Tartessos mocked.

Razin threw her an anguished look but said nothing. Trophies? Oh, I did wear those. Banners on my back and once, only once, I'd snatched the soul of a fallen foe who'd butchered an entire city in her folly. What I'd not done was mutilate the corpse of a fallen foe, made a *wolf fur cloak* of the woman who'd first taught

me how to use a shield and – I breathed out. Sabah, Sabah had deserved better. Of all the Calamities, she'd deserved better.

"You get one warning, Osená," I quietly said. "Test me on this again and you will not enjoy what follows."

I met her gaze, the dark eyes so defiant, and did not blink. They'd been allowed too much leash, these two, and I'd be glad to see the back of them when next I met Tariq. But until then, they'd learn meekness again even if it had to be beaten back into their bones. Razin said something in one of the Levantine languages, tone flat, and only then did Aquiline of the Slayer's Blood look away.

"Your audience is at an end," I said.

Razin, often the deftest of the two when it came to matters like this, simply inclined his head.

"We can resume the discussion when a record of deeds has been written and the White Knight's insight has been sought," the Lord of Malaga replied.

In the same sentence establishing that nothing had been settled and that under the Terms they had someone to bring into this as well if I came out too hard on the Barrow Sword's side. He was turning into a decent hand at that, I mused. Being surrounded by people who usually dwarfed him in power and influence had taught him something of subtlety, smoothed away some his rawness.

"A good day to you, Lord Razin, Lady Aquiline," Hakram gravelled, standing at my side.

I blandly smiled and said nothing, letting them speak their own courtesies before leaving. The Barrow Sword made to do the same but I discreetly shook my head. I took a long look at Ishaq Deathless when he sat back down, allowing the silence to linger. With that tanned skin, strong brow and a thick – if well-maintained – beard he was a fine instance of what I'd been told was classic Alavan looks. He was broad-shouldered as an orc and not much taller than me, with for sole warpaint two long streaks of ash grey just below pale brown eyes. I'd seen him in a shirt, where the muscles under that armour had been well-moulded instead of tucked away, and I was honest enough with myself to admit I might have taken him to bed once or twice by now if he'd not been under my command and so brazenly ambitious. From his occasional lingering look I doubted it would have been all that difficult to talk him into it either.

"Your people have this saying, you told me," I said. "Kick a barrow, die stupid?"

He looked highly amused.

"Kick a barrow, die a fool," the dark-haired villain replied, half-grinning.

"That's the one," I agreeably said, then narrowed my eyes. "Ishaq, don't go around kicking barrows when we're in the middle of a war for the right to keep breathing."

"You swore oaths, Black Queen," he reminded me, carefully.

"The Truce and Terms are a vessel to help gather Named to fight the Dead King," I said. "If the ambitions one of those Named threaten that cause, the Terms have failed in that purpose."

"I'm not asking them for land, or for right of rule," the Barrow Sword protested. "I ask that my deeds not fall into obscurity simply because I do not kneel at the altar of the Ashen Gods."

"And I think that's fair," I told him. "I really do."

All else aside, if a villain was rendering a service to Grand Alliance they were due the same recognition a hero would get for those deeds. Of course, fair only went so far in this world.

"So because I've grown passing fond of you, Ishaq," I continued, tone casual, "I'll tell you right now: if I have to choose between you and eighty thousand Dominion soldiers, you are going die tragically fighting Keter."

I'd not raised my voice in the slightest, yet the hardened killer almost flinched. I smiled amicably at him.

"Ambition is a virtue, when tempered by restraint," I said. "We understand each other, yes?"

"We do, Black Queen," the Barrow Sword soberly replied.

Vinegar had been served, so the other hand must offer honey.

"Good," I nodded. "Then I'll have the record of your laudable efforts in Hainaut written up and lean on the White Knight to have it confirmed independently by heroes. If it still looks like they're being unreasonable, I'll personally take this to the Grey Pilgrim."

His expression brightened, and I could only think of the way Wasteland villains would eat the poor bastard alive. Ishaq wasn't stupid by any means, he was just... uncomplicated. He took what he could, retreated in the face of superior force and saw absolutely nothing wrong in either thing. There was a soothing clarity to that way of living I sometimes envied.

"Then I take my leave, Black Queen," the Barrow Sword smiled. "I thank you for your time."

"Keep putting down Revenants and my door's always open," I smiled back. "Fair days, Ishaq."

"Fair nights, Black Queen," the villain replied.

I waited until he'd left before letting out a long sigh. I slumped back into my seat and closed my eyes.

"So?" I asked Hakram.

"You went too hard on Aquiline," Adjutant assessed. "I know why you did, but now she'll feel she's been dishonoured until she gets some sort of victory over you. We both know that your patience is going to run out on that."

It would, which meant I'd probably have to serve her up a meaningless win over something to soothe her wounded pride. Considering I was less than well-inclined towards Aquiline Osenia at the moment, that prospect did not fill me with enthusiasm. What had she done, to deserve this from me?

"It's not the same, Hakram," I said. "The Mantle, and that abomination the Champion wore."

A beat of silence.

"Levantine take trophies," the orc said. "Especially from famous foes. It is part of who they are as a people. I expect if she could have taken armour instead of fur, she would have."

I opened my eyes, stirred to anger once more.

"But she didn't," I hissed back. "And you know that's entirely-"

He sat at my side, around the corner of the table. The chair did not creak under his weight, as Cordelia Hasenbach was not one to forget such details.

"I know, Catherine," the orc told me. "Of course I know. But I also understand that to *them* there is no difference, and so your anger seems frivolous to their eyes."

"Praesi highborn murder each other at the drop of a hat, Stygians practice slavery," I flatly replied. "Am I to pretend their ways are just some quaint local custom as well?"

"My people eat corpses, and sometimes the living," Hakram frankly said. "Goblins take oaths about as seriously as porridge. I would be bitterly disappointed if you only took us in because those things have yet to prick you too sharply."

That actually stung to hear, and I drew back in surprise.

"That's different," I said, "it's not..."

"It's not one of the two Calamities you've loved," Adjutant kindly finished for me. "It's not the woman who taught you to keep your shield up when you swing a sword, worn on some stranger's back."

A long moment of silence passed as I struggled with my words.

"It's not wrong, to be furious about that," I quietly replied.

"No," he agreed, "it isn't. You can carry that grudge until you die, should you want to, and you'll not be wrong."

"But the Black Queen can't?" I bitterly asked. "I don't agree with that, Hakram. Akua said something once, about wants of the woman and the needs of the queen, but no one cuts it that clean. The Praesi have tried, and it's sickened them perhaps beyond mending. I'll have no part of it."

Adjutant set against the oak the hand of bone he'd earned in my service, along with near every other wound that rent his body. It was, I thought, a statement powerful enough that it need not be spoken at all to be heard.

"I am not Akua Sahelian," Hakram said, tone almost chiding. "I swore myself to Catherine Foundling, not a Name or a crown. I've no interest in splitting my oath between your and your shadow, seen by Wasteland eyes. But I will say, Warlord, that the moment you let hate choose your path for you at last fetters were clasped around your wrist."

He bared long fangs, sharp and pale as bone.

"If you cannot tolerate the way of the world, change it," Hakram Deadhand said, sounding even now like he did not doubt for a moment that I could. "If you will not take up those arms, though, do not keep clutching them in your grasp. Creation has no patience for the half-hearted."

I leaned forward, elbows on the table as I passed tired hands through my hair.

"I'm tired, Hakram," I admitted, looking down at the half-polished wood. "I'm tired and I slipped up and just... the moment I did, the *single fucking moment*, a kid died. Just like that. And I'd like to think I'm not the kind of monster that would wish a fourteen-year-old kid would die just because another one did, but..."

The tall orc leaned his head against mine, softly, and said nothing. It was one of the kindest things anyone had ever done for me.

"I understand him, now," I said.

And though the anger was not on my tongue, it was even worse than that. It'd settled in my bones, in the marrow of them, and now it was a part of me. One that would never leave.

"Who?" Hakram softly asked.

"Black," I murmured. "Why even knowing he was wrong he still wanted to win. To beat them. A single breath blown on the balance of Creation, so that for just a moment you could look at it and say: this is fair. This is equal. And know that it wasn't but you *made* it that way."

"There's nothing at the end of that road, Catherine," Adjutant said.

"I know," I said. "Gods, I know. But every time I see their kid survives and ours dies, every time I see they get to walk around in the skin mother of three and we're in the wrong for *daring* to be offended by that? I understand him a little better."

In the end, though Black had wanted to even the scales by pushing down on Good. And that wasn't a victory, not really, but for all his pale skin and cold steel mind there was something about my father that was utterly Praesi: the Wasteland only ever knew victory by triumph over others. The other way, the hard way, was pushing up the other scale. And I would walk that road, that was the choice I'd made. But, I thought as my forehead pressed against the cool oak and Hakram's hand lay on my shoulder, before my feet began moving again I could... wait a while. Catch my breath. I closed my eyes, alone in my tent with the person I loved most in this world, and it was the closest I'd felt to peace in years.

It would pass, I knew. So I enjoyed it, for the little while it lasted.

Chapter 9: Acceleration

"As sage in Nicae is a fool in Stygia."
– Free Cities saying

Afternoon Bell came and went before Hanno made his way into my tent. The bundle of reports that inevitably accompanied contact with Salia had eaten up even more of my time than I'd anticipated it would. Vivienne had been enthusiastic in her account of the progress in the talks over the Accords, writing that giving ground over whether or not scrying a foreign country could be considered an act of aggression – which both Procer very much wanted it to be, considering its massive deficiencies in both city-warding and scrying rituals compared to Callow and Levant – had allowed her to get concessions over what we'd termed 'civil diabolism', the summoning and binding of devils for purposes

other than war. The rest had been more disparate a pack of news than a cohesive, though no less useful for it.

Archer had apparently been seen in the Proceran heartlands with a sixth member to her band, which meant a fresh Named had been added to our roster and would be in touch soon. The First Prince had passed along a note on the state of the Grand Alliance treasury – which remained surprisingly good, all things considered – but also cautioned that the Principality of Brabant's harvests seemed headed for catastrophe. She went on to write me that feeding this territory, and its massive numbers of refugees, would put us squarely back in the red before winter came. Pickler had sent a refinement on the rotating siege harpoon ballistae schematics she'd made up in Twilight's Pass. She also mentioned in a separate letter, sounding somewhat flattered, that Prince Otto Reitzenberg had extended a formal invitation for her to found and settle a tribe in Lycaonese lands after the war.

It was a grave misreading of my Sapper-General's interest in leadership duties so I wasn't worried about poaching, but I doubted this would be the last of it. Even the Iron Prince had expressed interest in goblin engineering and, considering that Hannover was yet in the hands of the Dead King, his people had a great deal of rebuilding ahead of them. Still, maybe a strongly worded letter to Otto Redcrown might serve as a helpful reminder that trying to recruit from my sapper corps was, at the very least, a slight to the crown of Callow. Moving on to less grounded matters, the rumours gathered in the south and east by the Jacks remained wild as ever.

The dead were said to walk the streets of Nicae, General Basilia had supposedly eaten the heart of a holy oracle and could now see the future. A band of pale spectres was haunting the Green Stretch, all the while Dread Empress Sepulchral had turned into a black-scaled dragon and ravaged the outskirts of Wolof's territory. That last one might in truth be the reappearance of General Nekheb of the Tenth Legion, though I'd also heard it said they were nesting among the ruins of the Red Flower Vales so I was less than sure. Somewhat amusingly, it was also quite a popular tale that I'd apparently brought down the sky on Refuge so that I could steal its Named away into my service.

More important than the wild stories, though was the hastily tacked-on addition from Vivienne that Duchess Kegan had passed forward Dread Empress Sepulchral's request to open formal diplomatic talks with the Grand Alliance. So far the diplomacy there had been informal and half a secret, and I'd gladly left it to my successor and Hasenbach. This, though, would require my personal attention. Joy. At least we might get enough leverage from that I might be able to wheedle out whether Sepulchral was a genuine claimant or just a horse for Black to ride. I'd better bring Akua into this as well, though that wasn't unlike asking a

wolf about their opinion of the hunt. Still, even years away from the Wasteland she had a better grasp of the way functioned there than anyone else under my command.

Aisha's family was old and well-connected, after all, but ultimately minor nobility. The Sahelians lived and breathed intrigued at the very highest levels of Praes, and Akua hadn't just been any one of the lot: she'd been the heiress to Wolof, groomed for either rule of the High Seat or the claiming the Tower itself. Short of kidnapping an actual High Lord there was just no beating that. I was considering who else to bring into this – Hakram, naturally, but it might be worth bringing in some of the high-ranking officers I'd inherited from the Legions of Terror as well – when one of my guards popped in to inform me Hanno had arrived. I thank the man and rose to my feet, limping my way to the commode even as the White Knight entered.

He looked at me then sighed.

"Let it be brandy, at least," Hanno haggled.

I tapped the top of the commode, jostling a lock, and the door to left compartment popped open. I snatched out a bottle of Creusens brandy and two small silver cups. I'd been prepared. Amusingly enough it was easier to get him to drink liquor than wine, and he drank quick – if only to get it over with. He waited until my nonchalant gesture to take a seat, though I'd long told him not to bother anymore.

"Well bargained, White Knight," I solemnly said.

"You only ever say that when I've been had, Black Queen," he drily replied.

I limped back to the table, using his momentary distraction as he felt out one of Indrani's latest carvings to take a closer look at him. Even after two years of facing one brutal horror after another, the Sword of Judgement had little changed in appearance. His fuzzy hair was so closely cropped as to seem almost shaved, leaving the eye to linger instead on a plain but well-formed face. He was built like someone who worked for a living, which I'd always found appealing, and the long-sleeved grey tunic he tended to wear when out of armour had earned a few more stitches since I last saw it but still framed those muscled arms rather nicely. He wasn't a looker, not the way Ratface had been or Akua was, but he wasn't without his charms either. Not that I'd ever seriously consider going there, Crows, though apparently Tariq still suspected we were somehow secretly engaging in torrid trysts.

You'd think that after trying to mentor me into the grave the man would have a better appreciation of how much I had no intention of coming anywhere close to something that could, even vaguely

while in dim light, pass for a tragic love story. Dismissing the thought I idly noted that he'd brought a small leather satchel – papers, maybe? He shouldn't need to, his memory was unusually sharp. It was a side-effect of his aspect of Recall, he'd told me, which I'd found fascinating. How many aspects had little quirks like this one, barely noticeable boons tucked away in the shade of the more prominent use? Looking back, after getting Struggle as the Squire I'd gotten rather good at assessing the skill and power of my opponents compared to me. How much of that had been my gaining experience, and how much an ancillary benefit? It was an interesting bit to consider, if at this point largely academic.

"Is that the Saint of Swords that the Archer depicted herself fighting?" Hanno asked.

I set the two silver cups on the table and went to work on the bottle's cork.

"Battle of the Camps, it was," I agreed. "They had a scrap while Masego and I were dreaming."

"Impressive," Hanno said even as I finally got the cork out with a pop. "There were not many capable of facing Laurence de Montfort's sword up close and live to tell the tale."

Indrani had privately admitted to me that she'd waited until the Saint was tired out from the battle and it'd still been a damned close thing, but I wouldn't disagree with Hanno's assessment even knowing that. Archer's talent in close quarters was only slightly helped by her Name, while the Saint had been sharpening her skills in this regard for decades. Considering how much of a terror the woman had been in her old age, I often thought we'd been damned lucky not to fight her in her prime. I poured out two cups of brandy, quirked a brow at the dark-skinned man.

"Wouldn't have you been able to check with Recall, anyway?" I asked.

He grimaced.

"The fresher the death and the stronger the personality the more it... lingers after use," the White Knight admitted. "I would not call on the Saint of Sword's life without great need."

"Lots of her tricks came from her domain, anyway," I mused. "Which you can't mimic, as far as I know."

He shot me an amused look, well used by now to the way I went about digging up everything I could about his abilities. Well, it was no mystery I'd not been raised by angels. He touched his fingers to the brandy cup, brow rising.

"Two," he said.

"Five," I replied without missing a beat.

"Three," he compromised.

Ah, an opening.

"Twelve," I boldly tried.

"Four and I'll not tell Tariq you tried to get me drunk," he suggested.

Oh Gods was I not in the market for another hesitant, indirect conversation about not 'casting doubts on the nature of the Truce and Terms through unwise indulgence'. On the other hand, apparently the Witch of the Woods had heard about those and thought the whole thing was fucking hilarious – she kept making fun of Hanno in that nonverbal Gigantes language they used with each other, with all the poses and shifts. He had a stake in this as well, I figured.

"Five and I'll stop implying in front of Secretary Nestor that your tunic's grey because you don't wash it," I retorted.

As something said by the Black Queen about the White Knight, it went into the Annals every time. Every single time.

"Four and I'll share the Workshop gossip I received with you," Hanno offered.

You shit, I thought, not without fondness. He would definitely have shared that before, but he'd hold it back now for sure just so that when we next negotiated he'd have this to point back to.

"Fine," I mercifully allowed. "Four."

I set down the bottle on the table and took my cup, offering a toast.

"May you live to bury your enemies," I said.

"Fair winds and slow rivals," Hanno replied.

We clinked our cups and drank deep, setting down in unison. It took the edge off enough I barely felt the sting when I seated myself across from him.

"Dare I ask what's in the bag?" I probed.

"It is not meant to be a mystery," he said, leaning down to take the satchel before setting it in front of me. "It is a gift, Catherine. Your twenty-third nameday happened while I was away, no?"

I blinked in surprise.

"Oh," I said. "Yes. Thank you? I'm an orphan, so I don't really have one of those – just the foundling day late in the spring."

It also didn't explain why he'd given me a gift, though I wasn't complaining.

"From your polite confusion, I take it nameday gift-giving is not a Callowan tradition," Hanno noted.

"Not really," I admitted. "For nobles sometimes, I think, but for most people gifts are given at the solstices and when you reach fifteen."

The dark-skinned man cocked his head to the side, curious.

"Fifteen?" he asked.

"Age of enrollment," I told him. "Used to be, anyway. It was kept for private noble armies under the Empire but I kicked it up to seventeen all around when I took the throne."

Keeping it at fifteen would have helped fill the ranks after our losses more quickly but, as both Ratface and Governess-General Kendal had pointed out back then, if we kept pressing the young into service there'd be no one left to practice trades and tend to the fields. A large army was no help when it was busy starving.

"How interesting," Hanno said, sounding genuine. "Ashurans are expected to give yearly nameday gifts to those they are tied to – family, friends or close collaborators. All within the same tier, naturally. For a citizen to court favour from a higher tier or display favour to a lower one would be frowned upon."

The Thalassocracy of Ashur sounded like a deeply unpleasant place to live in, as usual. Weren't there families with citizens of different tiers in them? Still, the implications there were a little flattering: I was being called both an equal and close collaborator.

"Thank you," I said again, and took the satchel this time.

It was easy to unmake the bronze buckles, and within I found in neat little cloth packets what must have been at least half a years' worth of wakeleaf.

"You know, when I told you to keep some of the Delosi coin I didn't mean for you to blow it all on enabling my worst habit," I drily said.

It'd been, though, a rather touching gesture.

"I have also been considering buying another tunic," the White Knight calmly replied. "I've been told it passes as unclean to the unskilled eye."

I swallowed a grin and clasped his wrist in appreciation. He smoothly returned the gesture.

"So when should I be looking to return a gift in kind?" I asked.

"Two days past winter solstice," he smiled.

Ought to bring him to twenty-nine, that. As I recalled he had more or less five years on me, not that it showed: he had one of those faces which would look much the same age until he started greying. I set down the satchel to the side.

"So," I said. "Business?"

"To business," he agreed.

I poured him another cup, then myself, and we knocked them back without a toast. I gestured for him to begin as soon as the burn had faded from my throat.

"The Titanomachy reached out to us through Levant," Hanno began. "They are sending an envoy north."

I sucked in a surprised breath. The Gigantes were notoriously isolationist, and though they had longstanding ties to the Dominion it'd been my understanding those were limited to exchanges of gifts and the occasional favour. They didn't even trade with humans in the traditional sense, as far as I knew.

"You don't sound all that thrilled," I noted.

His body gave what might have seemed like a twitch at first glance but I'd learned to recognize as him beginning to use that silent language he used with the Witch before stopping himself.

"It will be a complicated matter to handle," he admitted. "I am told it is Ykines Silver-on-Clouds that was sent."

"Which is," I slowly said, "... bad?"

"When I left the Titanomachy, Ykines was *skope* for Hushed Absence," Hanno told me. "It is... hard to describe in human terms. A *skope* is one charged with a message, speaking for others, but it is not exactly a position of authority. It does denote respect, however, and the Hushed Absence is the chorus that most prizes retiring from the affairs of Calernia."

"So they sent us a lesser noble from the isolationist faction at court as the envoy," I tried.

"That is untrue in every single specific yet broadly accurate in essence," the White Knight said, sounding impressed. "You have to understand, Catherine, that since Triumphant and the Seven Slayings the Gigantes have only ever spoken of ties outside their borders in terms of loss."

"The Seven Slayings," I repeated curiously. "That's the Humbling of Titans, right?"

"I would not recommend using that name around any of their kind," Hanno advised. "The Slayings soured most of their kind on humans, though the tendency had been there for ages before."

"I never did get why they're still so viscerally furious about the Hum- the Slayings," I said. "Procer struck by surprise, sure, but that's hardly a first for them. Their armies still got savaged when they got deeper in, and all the Principate got to show for those deaths was a modest stripe of land added to southern Valencis."

They'd also gotten the Titanomachy to unofficially back down from its defence pacts with the Levantine petty kingdoms, which had allowed Procer to eventually keep pushing into Levant after its conquest of Vaccei. Yet the amount of losses taken during the Humbling had supposedly kicked back that conquest by at least a decade, so in a sense the Gigantes *had* fulfilled their treaty obligations.

"It is not the treachery itself but what was committed through it," the brown-eyed man said. "When the Principate called for talks, it was some of the greatest left among the Gigantes who went. Three of the last elder spellsingers, the *amphore* for the Sublime Auspice chorus and two candidates for the Name of Stone Shaper."

My brow rose.

"Choruses are court factions," I guessed.

"Gigantes are not social in the way humans are," Hanno admitted. "You would find their cities to be empty things, and there'd be no court to be found. A chorus is more akin to an ideology, though even within a chorus there will be differing songs. The Hushed Absence, for example, will call to both those who advocate for isolation and those who curtail wonder-making by all Gigantes. Yet some will speak to one over the other or speak of both these in relative moderation. A *skope* will be messenger for one of the shades of belief, should it gain enough adherents within the chorus."

"So what does the Sublime Auspice sing about?" I asked.

"Guidance of younger peoples and intervention beyond the borders," the White Knight said. "In the past they were also the foremost slavers among the Titan Lords."

I grimaced. Proceran history wasn't something I'd studied in great depth, especially not when it came to the south – which had barely ever crossed Callow's path before the Principate was founded – but I had learned some broad strokes back at the orphanage. *Arlesites are passionate and romantic people, fond of poetry and duels*, Douglas Robinson's much maligned yet still widely used 'Peoples of East and West' described them. *Their name comes from the ancient Arlesen Confederacy, which rebelled against the slaving giants*. There were stories to be found there, to be sure, but I'd always had a hundred other things to attend to and never had the Titanomachy seemed likely to become relevant to my affairs. It wasn't the first time I'd been wrong and was unlikely to be the last.

"They never recovered from losing their *amphore* to human Named while under truce banner," Hanno continued. "And though the killing of the candidates was a grave insult in the eyes of the Gigantes – not unlike killing a Fairfax prince would be to your people – it was the death of the spellsingers that incited outright hatred. The magnitude of that loss for them as a people is not easily put into words, so I will simply say it was worth great grief and grief often turns to matching enmity."

My brow rose.

"Named did that?" I asked. "I'd heard it was just assassins."

"All were Arlesite heroes save for the White Knight of the time, who was of the Cantalii," Hanno said. "Most of those Names are dead and gone now. Of the twelve assassins to strike only the Drake Knight survived, and not even that potent blood allowed him to grow back the arm he lost."

He had that distant look on his face as he spoke, the one that told me he was drawing on memories he'd obtained through Recall.

"So you're saying that since they're sending us the isolationist *skope* as an envoy, we shouldn't get our hopes up about the Titanomachy entering the war," I said, drawing him back to the here and now.

"To an extent," he replied, brow creased. "From what I can remember, Ykines was of the Hushed over the Absent – that is to say, his isolationism came as consequence of his desire to restrict wonder-making. It might be he is meant to haggle down contributions, not obstruct involvement."

"I've seen the wardstones the Blood use, Hanno," I said, hands tightening with want. "They have no fucking idea of how those

even work and they're still better in most regards than anything my people can make. Hells, even if they don't want to enter the war I'd take a hundred of them joining the ranks of the Arsenal and still lick their boots clean in thanks."

Metaphorically speaking, anyway. Considering their probable boot size, it seemed like a bit of hassle to get done otherwise.

"That is the complication, Catherine," he admitted. "In some ways, entering the war might be more popular. What I tell you now, I would have your oath no to repeat."

I let out a whistle. That was rare. He wasn't one to ask oaths without a reason, and I perhaps still a little charmed even now that the Sword of Judgement considered my oaths to have worth, so I gave it without argument.

"Gigantes are not ageless in the way of the elves or the drow," Hanno said.

To this day I was still uncertain as to whether he actually knew that Winter had done away with the mortal lifespan of the Firstborn or he'd simply, like most, assumed that drow were effectively immortal if not taken by strife or sickness.

"They gather power unto themselves by bathing in the light of moon and star in sacred places, by songs and patience, and this power lends them vitality," the White Knight said. "To be a spellsinger is to be born with the gift of power, to come to weave a second soul and through it be able to pluck at the chords of Creation. These are rare, and prized, as for most Gigantes to make a wonder is to craft with the very stuff of what keeps them alive."

My eyes narrowed.

"The Seven Slayings," I said. "They came after that tussle with Triumphant that's said to have made the Titan's Pond out of what used to be plains. How much of their lives did they spend to take her on?"

I'd always counted it passing odd, that a people capable of playing rough with the greatest monster to ever come out of the Wasteland had taken hits from an infant Principate without any great retaliation save for the building of the Red Snake Wall much later, after the Dominion freed itself. It made a little more sense now, especially if heroes were thrown into the mix. I knew better than most how dangerous those could be when properly motivated. Sisters bless, these days I'd come to rely on it.

"A fifth of their people died outright," Hanno frankly said. "Centuries of accumulated power were spent in an hour, and many left themselves only enough to live until they could fill

themselves again – yet, even now, a great many of the Gigantes are but a decade away from death should they not observe the old rituals.”

“So they’re not going to want to spend themselves close to the grave to save Proceran lives,” I grimaced. “Harsh. The spellsingers, though, if they’re born with the Gift wouldn’t they be effectively immortal?”

“In a sense,” Hanno conceded. “Yet most of them are young, by the reckoning of the Gigantes, and so have spent but a century or two accumulating power after forging their second soul – through both celestial rituals and their own gift folded onto itself, true, but even so it remains a delicate and time-consuming process. The trouble, here, is that the Titanomachy’s greatest wonders all require the stewardship of spellsingers to some extent.”

Of course they did, because those would have been made before good ol’ Triumphant swaggered in, butchered most of their spellsingers and emptied out the vitality-power reserves of a significant chunk of their population. Much like the Firstborn after Sve Noc first bargained for survival, they must have felt like rats scuttling in the ruins of their own empire, forced to choose between their lives and seeing their greatest works fall apart. Shit, no wonder they hated the Principate like poison: to them it must have felt like Procer savagely kicked them when they were down and just starting to consider how to get back up from the last kick.

“So if they’re with us they’re not keeping their own cities functional, which is going to be less than popular at home,” I sighed. “That’s great. If they’re that tied up, Hanno, why even bother sending an envoy?”

“Because inconvenience and hatred of Procer does not mean they are willing to surrender Calernia to Keter’s grasp without having lifted a finger to fight the encroaching doom,” the White Knight said. “I imagine that our failure to drive back the Dead King has them justly worried, given the scope of the efforts employed by the Great Alliance. I fully expect the Titanomachy will try to gift us old wonders instead of agreeing to craft new ones, and strictly limit the numbers they sent north. Yet even that much would be godsent, let’s not pretend otherwise.”

It’ll be fear that got them moving too, I mused, now that the initial disappointment had passed. Procer alone and surrounded by foes, the way it’d been before the Grand Alliance steadied, that’d be acceptable to them. But Procer as the heart of a great continental alliance that included even their old allies the Levantines? They couldn’t let that happen without keeping an eye on it. I imagined the great developments of the last few years would have attracted the attention as well. It was one thing to play the hermit kingdom when your magic was beyond the wildest

dreams of your neighbours, but what happened if the Arsenal put Procer on even footing in even just *some* regards? A Principate with a few war-making artefacts like that under its belt might not be so inclined to let it go when the Gigantes killed its people on sight near the border.

And given that the Twilight Ways were without precedent, I imagined a lot of their defensive wards would need reworking to adapt to their existence. That had to be keeping them up at night. While they might be able to access the Ways on their own, they'd need deep study before they could feel safely walled up again – and the quickest way to achieve that was sending people to the Arsenal to look through what we'd already found out. No, there were decent reasons for them to reach out even though Hanno had already succeeded at weaning me off the hope that the Titans would come in at this late hour and turn the tide of the war. Hells, if nothing else just seeing how fragile the situation on the fronts was might motivate them to send more than crumbs our way.

"I'll take what we can get," I fervently agreed. "I'm guessing this was kicked up to you because we can't use Cordelia as our diplomatic workhorse this once?"

"It would be unwise to ask the First Prince of Procer to meet Ykines Silver-on-Clouds on behalf of the Grand Alliance," he mildly agreed. "The Holy Seljun noted that Antigone and I were both mentioned by name, as even to the Hushed Absence we are known."

"Might have to be you, if they want a familiar face. Haven't heard of the Witch in a month," I said. "Not since she went up to have that gander in northern Cleves."

"From there she struck at the Enemy," Hanno informed me. "I expect you'll be getting the message from Princess Rozala late tonight. Antigone put together a band of five and intercepted a turtle-ship before it could land."

A savage grin split my lips. The Dead King marched his skeletons at the bottom of the Tomb and the Grave regularly, but it wasn't without effects on the equipment of his soldiers: you couldn't keep chain mail or a sword underwater for a month without it rusting. For the fodder that was all fine and good, but when Neshamah went to the trouble of arming a few thousand Binds in good steel he didn't then proceed to scrap it by sending them on an underwater march. For those he used ship transports, in his own horrible manner: massive turtle-barges made of bone and wood with a hollow shell protecting his elites from the elements. As tended to be the way with him, the turtle-ships were made to move by a necromantic flesh construct that was more lizard than turtle and boasted both massive claws and bags of liquid poison it could spew out in a stream.

"Godsdamn," I whistled. "Now that's something to brag about. They sunk it? I thought he'd hardened the shells to magic after Akua ripped one open last summer."

"It had the cold iron linings," Hanno confirmed. "Antigone made the tactical decision to use her available assets according to methods that had previously proved successful."

A beat passed and I cocked an unimpressed eyebrow at the hero.

"She threw the Mirror Knight real hard at it," I deadpanned.

The slightest twitch of the hero's lips was the most openly he allowed himself to be amused.

"I honestly can't remember a time where that didn't work," I pondered out loud. "Maybe she's onto something."

The Mirror Knight was, admittedly, the closest thing to unkillable I'd ever seen even amongst the distinctly hard to kill company that was heroes. During the Dead King's winter offensive, he'd lasted alone against three Revenants for an hour at Duchesne until Ishaq and I arrived. Though he'd put none of them down it was still utterly absurd that they'd not managed to put a serious wound on him either. Regardless, it was impressive he had a hard enough head that it had sent a few thousand of Neshamah's finest troops at the bottom of the Tomb. I poured us each another cup of brandy and offered another toast.

"To the Mirror Knight living to be thrown another day," I said.

"To success against the Enemy, whatever the shape of it," Hanno said, almost reproachfully.

I wasn't fooled, he found the whole thing just as hilarious as I did. The drinks went down, and the cups hit the table. A grimmer look passed across his face, afterwards, which immediately had my hackles rising.

"They did more than simply break a turtle-ship," the White Knight said. "When out there they found a hollow where the scrying disruptions didn't reach. They got a glimpse of northern Hainaut, before Keter adjusted to block them."

"Tell me," I said.

"The Hidden Horror is making a bridge across the tributary river to the Tomb," he told me, tone calm. "We'll be facing a full-on offensive within six months, and the numbers..."

I grimaced at his hesitation.

"How bad?"

"At least two hundred thousand of his finest foot is preparing to cross," Hanno replied. "He's building from both shores and building in stone – if we don't break it while unfinished, it will be warded and enchanted so thoroughly as to be near indestructible."

Fuck, I feelingly thought. On parchment a bridge wasn't much of an issue, considering Keter could walk its troops at the bottom of the lakes and ferry them across with turtle-ships, but in practice it might be a deathblow to our hopes of retaking Hainaut. The Tomb and the river limited how quickly the Hidden Horror could send his soldiers from the Kingdom of the Dead, especially considering the strong current of the tributary, and the turtle-ships were vulnerable to heroic raids. A bridge, though, meant he could just keep pouring troops into Hainaut day and night: and that wasn't a metaphor, it wasn't like the dead *tired*. So far we'd been keeping our edge against the massively larger numbers through superior troop quality: even a Proceran conscript could handle a few mindless zombies alone, or a pair of skeletons if their arms and armour were rusted through. Once we got full battalions of Binds to deal with, though, we'd be facing a well-armed and fully intelligent army.

If we gave them room to manoeuvre, let the Dead King deploy his full array of tricks against us, then this was the death knell of the Grand Alliance.

"Do you have dimensions for the bridge?" I said. "A notion of the timeline on its completion?"

"Antigone used one of the Repentant Magister's artefacts to capture an illusory image," he said. "And sent it south to me by a trusted hand."

Who did he – ah, and that would be why the Valiant Champion was in my camp. The three of them were supposed to be close.

"Shit," I cursed. "We need to bring this to the Alliance's high command as soon as possible. This changes our schedule for the offensive into northern Hainaut, at the very least. If we can grab it back fast enough we could put this entire mess to rest, or at least take the southern end of the bridge and defend it."

"Antigone went east to blunt another offensive against the western coast of Cleves," Hanno said. "Which means I will have to move south to speak with the Gigantes envoy myself."

"We're due a proper council anyway," I pointed out. "And a visit to the Arsenal couldn't hurt. Hells, the Painted Knife is due back soon as well, the way I hear it, and I'm curious to hear what she has to say."

"We gather it all at the Arsenal, then," Hanno agreed. "It ought not to be impossible, given the facilities there."

"It can be done in the other senses as well," I grunted. "We have the pull to ensure it."

Though the mood had grown more somber, I poured out another two cups. Hanno's eyebrow rose questioningly.

"Surrendering the last cup so soon?" he said.

"Well, if we're to have the conversation I suspect we're about to have we might as well finish the drinks first," I said. "Argument does tend to spoil the taste."

"Ah," Hanno exhaled.

He took the cup in hand and we drank. Because he was a polite sort, he waited a few heartbeats before speaking.

"You have lashed out at two heroes in two days, Black Queen," the White Knight said. "I would know why, and what happened to the Named you meant to bring back to camp."

Chapter 10:Reflections

"Men pray only to angels because their devils need no summons."
– King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

"See, I thought that too at first," I mused. "That I owed you some sort of explanation. But then I had another think, looked back at what I actually did. And, really, what's the worse you can put on me? I was curt with a kid. I told a Named who came in my tent uninvited to get the Hells out before I tossed her out."

I shrugged.

"I hurt a heroine's feelings," I said. "Twice. Ah, what utter perfidy."

The last sentence I uttered with a cocked brow and the driest tone I could muster.

"I suppose we'll have to get through this the usual way," I announced. "I'll bring the hammer and nails if you bring the cross, White Knight: if I'm going to be crucified over a trifle, the least you could do is go halvesies on the materials."

Hanno's face betrayed no reaction to my words as he studied me, calm as ever. No, perhaps calm was the wrong word, for it implied a degree of peace. Indolence, when at its worst. The White Knight was a creature of *certainly*, which leant him the appearance of calm, but there was nothing peaceful about

certainty. Especially in the hands of a hero, who could so often weave from it either death or salvation.

"You've not often had an equal, have you Catherine?" the dark-skinned man pensively said. "A few superiors, I imagine: most of them unkind or untrustworthy, more marks in the making than someone whose lead was worth following. And followers by the thousands, that one is beyond denial. Not all of them truly beneath you in skill and strength, either. You might insist that the Woe are more allies than subordinates, but when has one of them ever tried to give *you* an order?"

I rather hoped this wasn't about to segue into a little speech about the nature of the Woe. I'd had quite a few people try their hand at those over the years, most with knowledge of the individuals involved about as deep as Ketteran grave. Usually it was some sort of hackneyed comparison with the Calamities. I'd even once asked it of Black, out of morbid curiosity, to which he'd mildly answered that given the way even individuals who'd borne the same Names could vary so wildly in motivation and disposition any attempt to force precedent in groups of Named was, at best, misguided. Which had essentially been an elaborate way of telling me the Calamities were the Calamities and the Woe were the Woe, and anyone trying to hack at the truth of either to fit both into the mold of legacy was a fool. There were good reasons I remained fond of the man to this day.

"I will assume that this is meant to, eventually, reach something baring vague resemblance to a point," I said.

"If you perceive me as being subordinate to you, or allied, then you have a rather sweet temper," Hanno said, sounding rather fascinated. "Yet the moment I am seen as demanding answers from you or being set above you in some manner, you bare your fangs without hesitation. I have never seen it so neatly displayed in sequence as it was today, which I'll chalk up to exhaustion on your part. You are rarely so easy to parse."

I pushed down the toothy, slightly nasty smile I'd been about to send his way. No need to feed the metaphor.

"Most people don't enjoy being described to themselves, Hanno," I said.

Might be there was some part of truth to what he'd said, though. Adjutant saw more of me than anyone, so he'd be able to tell me — from there, it'd just be a question of how to smooth away that wrinkle. I couldn't afford to have obvious levers on my temper in my position, especially when I had a nascent Name. Mantles tended to put the best and worst of you in sharp relief, so it was all the more important to know what those were.

"You are not most people," Hanno calmly replied. "Already the measured part considers adjustment, while the one forged by your teachers begins to ponder if this is not a manner manipulation."

It wasn't difficult to manipulate who respected you, I knew. I did it all the time. His vocalization of that fact did nothing to put out the ever-burning embers of suspicion that seemed to fall asleep around fewer people every year.

"We've strayed far from whatever grievances you might want to bring to me," I said. "Which I've yet to hear, regardless."

"You were unkind to a scared and tired child of fourteen, for reasons which had little to do with her," the White Knight said. "If you could offer an apology or a reassurance so that she does not believe the foremost villain of our age had personal enmity towards her, I would appreciate it. I am, however, aware I have neither right nor means to compel this of you."

"Would you, if you did?"

I almost wondered who it was that'd asked that, before I recognize my own fool voice. The question had slipped out of me before it could be put away in the back of my mind, my lips moving of their own accord. Some part of me had expected some classical answer to come out of the White Knight's mouth before a heartbeat had passed, but that was doing Hanno disservice. The Ashuran hero considered the matter seriously, only answering when he was certain of his answer. I trusted his words more for that, twisted as the thought might be. It was one thing to say you would never but we both knew it was different when you actually *had* that power. I'd come up the ranks of the Empire talking of reason and compromise but later in my career, when I'd had the strength to dictate terms, how many times had I refrained from doing so? People always found it easy to dismiss the thought of drink before sweet wine was pressed to their lips.

"No," he said. "It is not a crime to be uncivil. Regardless, it is not my place to give such orders."

"You give orders to your heroes all the time," I retorted, and raised a hand to quiet him when he began to answer, "You don't get to call them *requests* when people listen to them every single time, Hanno."

"That is only the use of my authority as a representative under the Truce and the Terms," the White Knight told me. "It is not a personal matter."

"Yeah, so that's nonsense," I said. "We dressed it up real good, put it in ink and slapped some impressive seals onto the parchment, but pretending even for a moment that our authority isn't *personal* is ridiculous. Heroes don't listen to you because

you're a high officer of the Grand Alliance, they listen to you because you personally command their respect – either because of your record, your Name or your character."

"That sounded almost like a compliment," Hanno said, sounding amused.

I rolled my eyes.

"Look, to keep my side in line I have to show I'm powerful, ruthless and I'm willing to send a few plumb opportunities their way should they toe the line," I said. "For you it's more like a virtue pissing match paired with your war record – and on top of that you've got just a dash of divine right to lead, since this whole mess is somewhat crusade-shaped and you're the White Knight."

"I would ask how a virtue pissing match would take place in practice, but I've learned better than to provoke your talent for the descriptive," the White Knight noted.

"I'm serious," I flatly told him. "Tariq was everyone's favourite grandfather, until he made a deal with me once. He's still digging himself out of that hole. If he pulled out the same kind of tricks right now he used to catch my teacher, I'm not sure he wouldn't get a hero after him for it. Why? 'cause he made a truce with a villain. His virtue bragging rights were put in doubt, his heroic 'reputation', so now he couldn't do the job you do even if he wanted to."

"Trust in the Peregrine ebbed because a villain was instrumental in his resurrection," Hanno corrected. "There is long precedent in corrupting magics and even necromancy being used on heroes, which means those with only glancing knowledge of those events have reason to worry about him being unduly influenced."

He paused.

"Heroes who learn of even surface details of the affair tend to dismiss such concerns entirely," he noted. "I would argue you overestimate how deeply the Princes' Graveyard affected his reputation, at least as far as faith in his judgement is concerned."

"And you don't think it's grotesque," I said, "that butchering an entire village by plague didn't get people wondering about that, but that evening *did*?"

"I do not judge," the White Knight replied. "Now less than ever."

"But you do, Hanno," I hissed out. "Because you chose to be part of a structure, and that structure doles out judgement all the time. It judged that your kid, the one whose answer to fucking death on the march was to *get down on her knees and pray*, she's

the good one. She gets to live. Mine, the one who actually tried to bloody well do something? Well, he was bad. He gets to die."

His dark eyes were kind, which only strengthened the streak of anger that'd torn through me.

"How close was the mirroring?" Hanno quietly asked.

"The Scorched Apostate," I said, baring teeth. "A mage too. His sorcery mimicked Light, with a tinge of fire to it."

Tancred was the greater loss here, damn me twice for it. Healers were useful, but most were mediocre in fight against other Named unless they were part of a band of five. The Scorched Apostate would have been useful in half a dozen ways, from his eyes to his sorcery to the potential contribution to the Arsenal. What was the Stalwart Apostle going to do, except dole out Light? If the Heavens were going to pick the children they saved, they could at least pick them *better*.

"I take it he is dead," the White Knight asked.

"The Dead King got the drop on me," I straightforwardly said. "Kid fell asleep, the new ghouls ate and replaced my escort while I was studying the remains of the village and turned him into a Revenant."

I saw him, saw the cast of his face and his mind as he almost asked why a village had become remains, but then he thought better of it. He had a knack for knowing when to advance and when to retreat, this one.

"I'm sorry," Hanno said. "It would have been a blow, and Pascale's survival would have been salting the wound."

"I shouldn't have been curt with your kid," I conceded. "But I will not apologize for speaking the truth to her, either."

The sooner she learned that providence was not a panacea for poor decisions, the better.

"That," the White Knight calmly said, "is where we disagree. You did not speak the truth to her, you simply spoke in anger and dismay."

"They've got it all handled, then? How lovely," I scathingly replied. "If the Heavens have it all under control, forgive me for meddling. I'll march my armies home and leave you lot to the business of *winning*."

"Ninety-nine times out of a hundred," Hanno quoted, "nine hundred and ninety-nine times out of a thousand, that act of faith would have killed dozens of thousands. That is what you said, word for word. Regardless of your sarcasm, I disagree."

"How many little villages did the zombies eat, to make up an army whose numbers warranted three heroes and a fourth forming to fight?" I said. "Five, ten, twenty? You really think none of the people there ever thought to pray their way out of it? They still died, White."

"You take helplessness for negligence," the dark-skinned man flatly replied. "Do you sincerely believe that, if the Heavens had been able to empower a champion during those tragedies instead, they would have stood by and done nothing? There are *rules*, Black. What you condemn as apathy, I mourn instead as inability."

"Gods should not need to be *excused*," I harshly said. "If you're to claim yourself as the source of all that is Good, then either triumph or stop strutting about. If faith is a wager, then at the very least they should have the fucking decency to acknowledge it."

"Below are deities as well," Hanno said. "While deploring that the Heavens are not omnipotent, in the same breath you rage only at the half of the Gods trying to mend-"

"I've seen the work of Choirs," I softly interrupted. "And I do not call that *mending*. I'll say this for the Gods Below: utter bastards that they are, they always grant the precise measure of what was bargained for. And they don't ask you to kiss their feet for it first."

"Because Below does not have agents or servants," the White Knight sharply said. "It has horses, and they are ridden 'til they *break*. Or are you so enamoured of the Hellgods you will not acknowledge that by the time hero's blade bites into the flesh the villain is long dead? That whatever beauty, whatever decency there might have been in what drove them at first, it ever transmutes into deaths and red madness?"

"I find it rich of you to argue this, given that before the Graveyard the two oldest heroes were the Saint and the Pilgrim," I snorted. "Which of them did not have a body count to match those of the greatest villains of their age? Above warps you just as much as Below does us, except we're supposed to pretend in your case it's a good thing. It's almost like wielding great power and rubbing elbows with unearthly entities for decades has consequences no matter what direction your prayers are headed."

Vivienne had made it plainly clear that the Dominion of Levant would rather leave the Grand Alliance than sign onto the clause I'd pushed to be added against named rulers, but I still believed in the principle: Names affected you, everyone knew that. It was just that the side dressing in white had convinced itself into believing for them it was never a bad thing.

"Would you have balked at comforting a child you scared, in the days before you became the Squire?" Hanno simply asked.

That stung, though half the sting came from the surprise. I hardly ever thought about those times, nowadays. In every way that mattered the girl Catherine Foundling had been died when I chose to take the knife Black had offered me.

"I some ways I was even worse of an ass at sixteen," I replied, unsure what the true answer to his question would be. "And you're falling into that old heroic trap, White: looking back at olden times and thinking they were a golden age instead of an age just like this one, with troubles and joys both."

"Or perhaps you are falling into that old villainous trap, Black," Hanno said, "of refusing to look back at who you were in fear of what it might make you question now."

"Funny thing, about fear," I said. "I'd wager I know it a lot better than you, *Sword of Judgement*. I don't get to kick my decisions upstairs when I have to make them."

"And you believe this to be easy?" Hanno said, cocking his head to the side. "That restraint, patience, faith – they are somehow easier paths to follow than those you tread?"

I bit my tongue, because even angry as I was I would not descend into petty insults. That beat of silence let him take the initiative in speaking again.

"The child you so disdain," the White Knight said, "had magic to call on. Enough she could have fled or fought the undead. Yet when death swallowed her little corner of the world, she did neither. She sought a way to *heal* the people who doubted her, and when all she knew failed her she still did not give up. She threw away what she was to help others, Black, and I will not let you even *imply* that such a decision was cowardice or laziness. It was courage, and a refusal to compromise over what she held dearest."

"And if her story had been just a little off," I said. "To the side, and it just didn't quite settle into the proper groove for a Name – would you still be praising her then? Because she would have made for a courageous corpse, true enough, but we'd have a rampant plague on our hands."

More corpses, and those would not be the sort inclined to stay in the ground. It was all nice and good to be principled, until those principles started applying mostly to the way the world should be and not the way it actually was.

"Yet that is not what happened," Hanno said.

My frustration mounted.

"But it could have-"

"It did not, nor will it," the White Knight said, sounding the faintest bit irritated as well. "She is the Stalwart Apostle, a story of faith in the dark rewarded. You were advising her to act in a manner that goes against her Role, Catherine. If she takes the wager, she'll win every time."

"She couldn't have known that in advance, Hanno," I said. "Or you, for that matter. Are you telling me we should give advice to kids that'll get them killed most of the time?"

"I believe we should advise people according to who and what they are," he replied. "Yet your objection, I see, is not with the advice some young Named benefit from being given."

"You can't tell people that praying will solve things," I flatly said. "It won't, except in one in a hundred thousand occurrences like this. If that's what you put out as a story, that's what people will do instead of acting to save themselves. People can't rely on the Heavens for that, they'll just *die*."

If prayer somehow summoner heroes to the peril, or called forth angels or really anything useful at all this wouldn't get stuck in my throat so much but it wasn't like attending fucking sermons at the House made you able to use the Light.

"People rely on the Heavens for more than just intervention," Hanno chided me. "Faith in Above guides a soul both on Creation and beyond; simply because it does not call a storm of fire does not make it worthless. Besides, prayer does not preclude action."

"If you've got time to kneel and mutter, you've got time to raise a palisade," I bluntly replied. "One of them's a lot more useful than the other."

"I understand that you do not keep to Above," the White Knight said, frowning. "Nor would I expect you to. Yet your insistence that faith and ability are mutually exclusive is, to say the least, insulting."

"Faith doesn't keep the dead out," I said.

"Most the time," Hanno gently said, "neither does the palisade."

But there was the gap, I thought. He was phrasing as prayer, faith, making it some grand old thing. But what it was, in practice, was sitting and hoping someone else would solve your problems for you. And I couldn't abide that, not in people I was supposed to respect, not even if it *worked*. Because for most people it didn't, and you couldn't call it a solution if it worked one time in a thousand. But there was no point in arguing this with him, was there? This was a man who'd embraced the role

of champion for the Choir of Judgement and never looked back – he'd been able to call on the judgement of the Seraphim with the flip of a coin for years. There was no questioning that kind of closeness with the divine and telling him the only two gods I'd ever liked were the ones I'd helped make would only amuse him.

"Nothing more to be said on this, I don't think," I sighed.

"Agreed," the White Knight replied. "I do enjoy our talks, Catherine, though I doubt we'll ever change each other's mind. If your own philosophy is to be the face and method Evil takes in the decades to come, it is one I can make my peace with."

I grunted, not replying outright. Of all the heroes I'd met he was one I had most affinity for, but sweet as that could be sometimes on other it only served to bring into relief the things we deeply disagreed on. None of them, though, were worth parting ways over. I'd tolerated worst of people I respected less.

"You're not bringing me an official complaint under the Terms, am I understanding correctly?" I asked instead.

"Neither Rafaella nor Pascale sought me out for one, that is true," Hanno confirmed

I might despise the Champion, but I'd at least admit she didn't seem like the kind of woman who'd run to the White Knight after getting her pride bruised.

"I am not demanding answers of you," the dark-skinned man continued. "I am simply noting your rather famous sense of diplomacy had lapsed of late."

I rolled my eyes at that. I wasn't a diplomat, I was just good at maneuvering myself into a position where people had to listen to me or the consequences to them would be horrid. As for handling villains, that wasn't diplomacy: I was pretty sure you stopped being able to call it that after the first two times you dropped someone at the bottom of an Arcadian lake and left them there for thirty beats before taking back them out to... emphasize the importance of keeping a civil tongue.

"It has been made clear to me I've been taking on too much," I admitted. "It's taking its toll in a lot of ways, some of them more subtle than others."

Some were not subtle at all, like the fact that the White Knight had brought back to camp a recruit while I'd brought back a corpse. Hanno grimaced, the expression odd to see on his face. While he was not solemn, neither was he prone to strong expressions. I watched his arm coil as he closed his hand, reaching for something against his palm. A coin, I thought. *The* coin.

"I have contributed to this, Catherine, and I apologize for it," Hanno said as my brow rose in surprise. "In many matters I have deferred to you and relied on you to express to the Grand Alliance our shared opinions."

"It's not like you've been sleeping in," I drily said. "You've been either out there, training heroes or here with me since the war got going."

"You have duties I do not," he frankly said. "As a queen and a general. I have known this yet often allowed you to take the lead on shared responsibilities whenever you offered."

He slowed, looking uncomfortable for a passing beat.

"It was comfortable for me, deferring," the White Knight admitted. "In the wake of the silence left by the Hierarch's folly it was pleasant to let someone else take charge and rely on the sharpness of their vision until I got my bearings. And, after, I saw no harm in leaving matters as they were: you excelled, and I could contribute in ways that did not involve changing the way of things."

"You didn't force authority onto me," I said. "I took it, knowingly."

In those early days, even with our unsettling connection weighing on the scales I wasn't sure how much I would have trusted him anyway. By that point I'd hardly ever met a hero that hadn't tried to kill me, much less one who was actively trying to be *helpful*.

"And it has run you ragged, hasn't it?" Hanno murmured. "You nearly never allowed yourself to be this... raw around me. Even drunk you are guarded."

I clenched my teeth. This was starting to sound a lot like pity. *Save your pity for the kid who'll never reach fifteen*, I thought. *I'm just tired and wicked and wary*.

"I would begin handling the formal correspondence with the First Prince and Highest Assembly, if you've no objection," the White Knight firmly offered. "And, considering the many demands on your time, perhaps your end of the Origin Hunts could be passed to another villain."

"Beastmaster-" I began.

"Cannot afford to alienate the *both* of us," Hanno said. "And is well-aware of this. He'll collaborate with whoever you choose."

He said as much in the tone of someone who fully intended to make that prediction into a fact, blade bare if need be. The White

Knight had taken to Ranger's wayward pupil even less than I had, which was how Beastmaster had ended up largely in my wheelhouse in the first place.

"I intend to withdraw from the front for some time," I admitted. "If necessity dictates that we begin preparing an all-out assault on northern Hainaut soon it'll not be as long or restful a withdrawal as I'd been considering, but as it is I'm considering heading to the Arsenal early."

Masego would be there, who I'd not seen in too long, and if I got lucky maybe Indrani would be as well – although in that sense the getting lucky would be coming after her presence was confirmed. Gods, that'd do me some good as well. When shady, ambitious Levantine villains were starting to look tempting it meant it'd been too long. And, Hells, even if she wasn't odds were that Nephele would be there. That remained an enticing piece of unfinished business.

"You should," Hanno encouraged. "We've ended the immediate threat of the plague and the Grey Pilgrim is tracking down whatever remnants might have been seeded – he might come to take Pascale for a journey soon – so aside from military matters you should be able to hand off there's no pressing need for you to remain."

"The Blood might come to you with another beehive that got kicked," I told him.

"The Barrow Sword?" he asked.

I snorted.

"Guess," I said.

"I expect it will and in a compromise that pleases no one in particular," Hanno said. "Either separate rolls of the Blood for the villainous, or admission into the existing ones with most of the attendant privileges stripped out."

Which would be a massive gain for Ishaq anyway, though well shot of what he wanted. Much as he might protest otherwise, the Barrow Sword very much wanted a little corner of Levant to rule. One where he could begin gathering other Bestowed from our side of the fence, and began smashing his way into a degree of prominence at some other family's expense. He was not so much a fool as to think he had a chance of toppling the Isbili, but he was ambitious enough I would not put it beyond him to have an eye on taking one of the great cities belonging to another founding bloodline.

"Either way I can't let them simply bury the man," I said. "It'll close the door on any other Levantine villain joining us, and I swore oaths otherwise besides."

"I'll advise restraint and compromise, then," the White Knight replied. "Yet even that does not seem too pressing a need – scrying back and forth with Levante will take months."

"So long as the Holy Seljun and the rest of them know I'll frown on Ishaq being cheated," I said. "At the very least the man is owed recognition for the things he's actually doing."

"A sensible stance," Hanno nodded. "Is it him you'll be naming as your stand-in for the Origin Hunts?"

The Barrow Sword, serving as some poor freshly-risen Named's introduction to the Truce and the Terms? No, that had disaster written all over it. That'd need someone with a defter touch, and I wasn't sure I'd be able to spare Hakram.

"I'll probably pull the Rapacious Troubadour back from Brabant," I frowned. "He's certainly got the knack for finding hidden things."

Archer would probably have taken him into her band of five, compulsive killer or not, if she'd not already been full-up. I was rather happier with her trusting her back to the Harrowed Witch instead, even if she'd murdered her own brother – sometimes it could be slim pickings, when it came to recruiting 'trustworthy' villains. With his thirst for death and songs sated by the access the First Prince reluctantly had given him to death row prisoners, the Troubadour had nonetheless proved to be damned useful. He'd predicted the skirmishes between refugee camps and the Brabant locals months before they happened, even identifying the likely ringleaders for violence on both sides, which had allowed us to snuff that whole mess out in the crib. He'd also brought two other Named into the Truce and the Terms without there being violence involved, one of them even being a heroine, so between the instincts and the silvertongue he was probably my best bet around here.

I'd need someone to keep an eye on him, but that would also have been true if I named anyone outside the Woe.

"I don't suppose I could talk you into sending for the Hunted Magician instead," Hanno tried.

I snorted. The mage was much too useful in the Arsenal to be sent traipsing around the countryside.

"I'd thought not," the White Knight sighed. "I'd hoped it would be someone halfway respectable."

"I'll take that as a backhanded compliment," I said.

He smiled, surprised, and to my own surprise extended his arm to take the bottle of brandy in hand. He poured us each a cup with neat, measured spills that wasted not a drop.

"What are we drinking to?" I asked, taking my cup and raising it.

"Trouble waiting until tomorrow," he toasted.

Hells, I'd drink to that.

Chapter 11: Veer

"A dog to the brave, a wolf to the craven."

– Arlesite saying

I would head for the Arsenal tomorrow, I decided after the White Knight left.

There were still decisions to be made and responsibilities to discharge, so I put my back into it instead of leaning back into my seat and sleeping for a few months the way I wanted to. It was tempting to simply say I could take the bundle of reports and letters with me, but if I wanted to keep a decent pace while on the move I couldn't afford to have wagons of affairs and a crowd of attendants with me. That meant answering every bit of correspondence I'd received – or left to languish, honesty compelled me to admit – over an afternoon's span, Hakram flitting in and out of my tent like some big green bureaucratic butterfly after I'd told him of my intention. I'd left Baron Henry Darlington's complaint about the continued Deoraithe presence in the northern baronies unanswered for two months, considering the shit knew very well it'd been at Vivienne's order that Duchess Kegan had sent her soldiers to hold our end of the Passage. He was just trying to extract concessions for the supply convoys passing through his territory to feed the host there, the rapacious prick.

I penned an amicable reply inviting him to propose a plan to field a force apt to replace Kegan's, if his objections to the Deoraithe were so deeply felt. No doubt he'd enjoy that, it was the kind of thing that could be used to muster up some support and influence among the few remaining nobles of Callow. I added that he should forward such a plan to 'Heiress-Designate to the Crown Vivienne Dartwick' as soon as it was done, which he'd enjoy a great deal less. Did he really think I'd not noticed he was trying to go over Vivienne's head by calling directly on me over something she'd already ordered? I might be the Queen of Callow, but I wasn't fool enough to start undermining my own chosen successor's authority. The invitation from the Closed Circle of Mercantis to attend one of their auctions had already expired by the time I got it, in a practical sense, given that the auction had already been held when I got the letter. I'd been meant a

mark of honour than a real expectation I'd leave the front, though, so I wrote a polite refusal anyways.

It always paid to be polite to people you owed money to, even if the 'you' here was the Grand Alliance and not me personally.

The offer by the Holy Seljun of Levant, one Wazim Isbili – who was, to my understanding, Tariq's grand-nephew – to formally send an ambassador to the Callowan court and receive one from us in Levante in turn was rather more pressing. It was heartening to see that the Dominion was willing to establish closer ties with my kingdom, and to an extent rarely sought given the distance between the two realms, but there were... complications. For one, I didn't really have anyone to send as an ambassador. In the Old Kingdom that'd been a role for the highest ranks of nobility, which had been quite thoroughly exterminated in the decades since the Conquest. My father being the viciously meticulous bastard that he was, he'd also done all he could to stamp out what one might call diplomatic apprenticeships. Almost like he'd wanted to make sure Callow was isolated and incapable of properly reaching out. It was a sad but undeniable fact that most 'diplomats' I could send would be Praesi officers of noble birth from my army, with as other option maybe Brandon Talbot. Who I needed in command of the Order of Broken Bells anyway, making him highly unsuitable for the task.

I kicked that decision back to Vivienne, after pondering the matter a bit, along with a note outlining that she'd be in charge of finding a suitable ambassador if she decided to accept. I also suggested that a potential Levantine ambassador should be received by her in Salia rather than at my 'court' in Laure, and lastly stipulated that no ambassador of ours could be related to Duchess Kegan. There was already enough discontent at the way the Duchess of Daoine kept naming kin and vassals to key court and bureaucratic positions, she needed no encouragement. Especially if a decade from now the Duchy of Daoine was to be independent, complicating the loyalties of all such appointees by a great deal. More recently, the Iron Prince had sent a missive describing the way the dead beyond the defensive lines had massed for assault before suddenly withdrawing and asking if I had an explanation.

I spent the better part of an hour describing the Dead King's latest plot to tie us here down south while he went on the offensive again. Klaus Papenheim had added a note that his envoy had spoken glowingly of the results of the assault formation on the field – somewhat to my surprise, given that she'd not expressed such enthusiasm before me – and that he would want to pit a formation against a more traditional mixed force of Bones and Binds before committing to that doctrine but he was definitely interested. Amusing enough, he also warned me that Otto Redcrown had extended an offer of settling in Lycaonese land

to Sapper-General Pickler but that no offence should be taken by it. Any such offers made in the future would pass by me first. It was enough for me to soften my language when I wrote to the Prince of Bremen over the matter, mentioning that I was willing to serve as intermediary between the Lycaonese and the Confederation of the Grey Eyries if they wanted to extend that offer to the Tribes instead of to troops sworn to my service.

The rest was minor correspondence, mostly from my commanders on other fronts, including the usual letter written in Crepuscular from General Rumena that turned out to bear some insulting nuance to a native speaker I wouldn't get without asking for help. Hence getting me insulted in front of an audience every single time. The old bastard never actually bothered to send me proper reports, given that Sve Noc saw to it we spoke in 'person' regularly. I'd be due that tonight, I thought. Not necessarily a conversation with Rumena, but communion with my patronesses. Last time they'd brought me in for a waking dream it'd been to show me the sigils of the Exodus raising the foundations of a hidden city in the depths of Serolen, though also to make a point that warfare around the edges of the Gloom reborn was growing... rougher. The Dead King was getting serious about dislodging them from their positions, not just trying to erode them one corpse at a time. I set those drifting thoughts – a sure sign I'd been going through these chores for a while – aside when Hakram flitted back in, wasting no time to bring another folded parchment to me. I took it with a sigh.

"What am I looking at?" I asked, eyes begin to scan the cramped lines.

"The proposed numbers and composition of our escort to the Arsenal," he said.

I frowned.

"I don't need knights," I said. "They're a lot more useful out here."

"You're the Queen of Callow," Hakram pointed out. "Knights are expected. They expect is as well, Catherine."

"I've no personal guard," I said. "There will be no second Gallowborne. If the Order of Broken Bells understands this differently, Talbot is in need of being disciplined."

These days I was not quite so prone to leaping into the fire, but what mortal guard could possibly be expected to survive the kind of messes I got into? No, there would be no revisiting that old blunder under a different name.

"And cut that number in half," I added. "I want us riding briskly."

"Wagons don't ride briskly, Catherine," Adjutant gravelled.

"Then they can catch up at the Arsenal," I said. "I'll not double the length of the trip for comfort."

"Let me requisition packhorses, at least," the orc said.

I waved my hand.

"So long as we don't slow," I said. "And send for Akua, will you?"

He nodded.

"You'll also need to personally write to the Rapacious Troubadour, if you want him to take up Origin Hunting without feeling slighted," he reminded me before leaving.

Ugh, and I'd been just about done too. That letter I took my time in writing, since he was a prickly thing for a bandier of words and not half-bad with a knife. Mind you, when he'd admitted he stole songs from those he killed I probably shouldn't have replied 'surely you mean souls' in a dry tone. He hadn't taken that well. Still, vicious bastard or not he'd sniff out any Named popping out in this neck of the woods and ease them into the Truce – and I'd make it clear that Hanno was in the area too, which ought to keep him honest when it came to his more unsavoury tendencies. I was up and limping about looking for my seal when my right hand and my left arrived. I waved in their direction, pushing aside sheaths of parchment with a frown.

"It's in your desk," Hakram said.

"I looked in my desk, thank you very much," I waspishly replied. "It's not in-"

Having stepped around my desk and opened one of the drawers even as I spoke, he produced my personal seal – the Crown and Sword, as it'd come to be known – and said nothing. His silence was, admittedly, quite damning enough on its own.

"Must have been under something," I weakly said.

"Walnut shells, mostly," the orc reproached.

I winced.

"Look, sometimes it's late and I'm not hungry enough for a meal," I defended.

"And so the Black Queen so spoke to her dark legions," Akua intoned. "Bring me walnuts, my wicked servants. But don't tell Adjutant, for he gets snippy about the mess."

I flipped a finger at her and hobbled to the side of the desk, picking up the bar of grey wax I'd set next to the letter before forming black flames against the side. Wax dripped and I dismissed the fire, extending my free hand and receiving my seal from Hakram. With a firm push the seal was affixed and I set the letter aside.

"Right," I said. "So I considered it, and we'll be scrapping the wardstone to get the obsidian spike."

I gave a heartbeat of room for Akua to protest, but of course she'd been taught better than that.

"I'm not comfortable going on campaign against Keter with a repaired wardstone anyway," I told the shade. "So we might as well get another weapon to study out of it."

"You no longer speak in the theoretical," Akua noted.

When it came to a summer campaign? No, no I did not. That little revelation about the bridge had ensured as much. We couldn't afford to ignore that.

"Talks with the White Knight were fruitful," I grunted. "I'll need to speak with the rest of the Grand Alliance leaders, but an offensive campaign in Hainaut is now a certainty – the only thing up in the air is the timing of it."

"I'll see to extracting the spike immediately, then," Akua decisively said. "If you'll excuse me?"

I nodded my thanks, she returned them with a smile and just as quick as she'd come she was gone. The tent flap closed behind her, cutting through the slice of dusk it'd bared. She must have appreciated the courtesy of being told in person, I supposed, even if ultimately I'd not taken her advice.

"Tell me when it's done," I said, eyes turning to the tent flap. "I'll have a look at it myself."

"And until then?" Hakram asked, sounding curious.

"It's getting dark out," I said. "Time to speak with the Crows."

—

At the exact moment night fell, I was seated alone in the dark of my tent.

The sprite-lanterns had been hooded, the braziers put out, and I'd dragged my fae seat away from the desk so that there'd be more room around. I'd long grown familiar with weaving silencing strands of Night around my tent that would prevent eavesdropping, be it physical or otherwise, and even my guards had been told to

step further away. My pipe in hand, breathing in the wakeleaf I'd been gifted, I watched the burning red brand that was the only light inside and spat out a long stream of acrid smoke. The only sign that Sve Noc had deigned to join me was a slight breath of breeze, almost like an exhale, and then they were there. Perched on either side of me, on the back of the seat, great crows feathered in darkness so deep and even the dark of the tent seemed bright in comparison. Long, sharp talons dug into the wood of the armchair with a sound like steel scraping bone.

"First Under the Night," Andronike said, voice cool.

Like stone far below where the sun never shone, like a deep lake whose waters were as a veil.

"Losara Queen," Komena said, voice sharp.

Like the ring of steel against steel, like pride and hate and all the things that made men go mad.

"Sve Noc," I replied, dipping my head in respect.

Two years was perhaps not so long a span, as gods would have it, but it had made a world of difference with these two. They were no longer taking their first stumbling steps past the threshold of apotheosis: these were goddesses in all the arrogant vigour of their youth, casting a covetous eye upon the world. And I was, on most days, the closest thing they possessed to restraint. I breathed in the smoke, held it in my throat and blew it back out. I ought, perhaps, to be afraid of those sharp-clawed patronesses of mine. I'd never quite managed, though. That might just be the reason they took my advice still.

"General Rumena brings ill tidings back to the Night," Komena croaked.

"Do they?" I mused. "I've not had the displeasure to hear them."

"Watch," Andronike ordered. "Listen."

The darkness within shifted as the Sisters seized the darkness for their own, made it as a domain forced onto Creation. It was one of their lesser tricks – a paltry thing, compared to the waking dreams that saw me tread grounds halfway across the continent and speak with others as if I were there – but it was still a casual display of power. Similar end could be achieved with sorcery, true. But it would be the work of years, not *moments*. I saw now, from my seat, two different fractured memories given unto the Night by willing Firstborn.

A human, a prince, an Alamans. All three and no longer young, seated with another crowned head: Rozala Malanza, vulgar in form to drow eye yet respected for its mettle. Not so its companion, this Prince of Cleves who could not preserve its sigil yet had not seen it stripped from its grasp.

"- this talk of leaving all conquered lands to the dark elves," Prince Gaspard of Cleves snorted. "A kingdom's worth, for a paltry few thousand raiders? It is madness, Princess Rozala."

"The greater might of the Empire Ever Dark fights in the deep north," Princess Rozala replied.

"And let them keep it, by all means," Prince Gaspard dismissed. "But the lands south of Hannover's height should be brought into the fold: some of them would make good farmland, after a proper cleansing. It would be a waste to surrender them to these lesser elven cousins."

—

A human, a killer, the Dawnstride: Mirror Knight, humans called it. Unsettling, its power like the sting of morning, and harder to kill than Savanov Hundred-Lives. But like most cattle, its guard lowered when it was busy mating with another of its kind. The other one in the bed: human, the daughter of a prince, Langevin. Carine, daughter of the Gaspard. They spoke after spending themselves.

"You really should consider it, Christophe," Carine Langevin said, fingers trailing naked flesh.

"The war's not won, Carine," the Mirror Knight replied.

"But when it is, all those lands will need proper stewardship," Carine Langevin insisted. "And who better than one of the Chosen who fought to reclaim it?"

"I wouldn't know the first thing about ruling," the Mirror Knight said.

"It would be my honour to help you, of course," Carine Langevin smiled.

—

I let out a shallow gasp, closing my eyes. How very Proceran, I thought, to begin divvying the spoils of victory before the end of a war we were currently losing. Malanza had seemed lukewarm at the notion, at least, so I didn't have to revise my opinion of her by too much. That she'd not stamped out this petty scheming immediately, though, got stuck in my throat. Hadn't they learned by now that it was exactly this sort of habitual treachery that'd

nearly seen them stand against the Dead King alone? What exactly did they think was going to happen next time a calamity like this struck and Procer had a record of backstabbing *even the people who fought to save it*? I brought the pipe to my lips and breathed in the wakeleaf, ordering my thoughts as I let the burn in my throat sharpen my attention, and spat it out.

"That's one prince," I finally said. "It would have been too much to ask for that *all* of that lot be kept honest by even the looming prospect of annihilation."

And if it'd been going to happen anywhere, it was going to be Cleves. Between the Firstborn forces under Rumena, the veteran Dominion reinforcements under Lord Yannu Marave and Rozala Malanza's practiced hand guiding the fight, it was the front that'd arguably least suffered. While the Dead King's raiding parties frequently slipped the coastal defences and warfare around the lakeside fortresses was an almost permanent fixture, it was the most 'stable' of the fronts. The city of Cleves had not suffered a third siege, the supply lines remained wide open and the Named there were proving capable of dealing with Revenants – at least defensively, as the Stormcaller still had the run of all western Lake Pavin and we had no one that could touch her in the water. No, if anyone was going to start getting ideas it was the royals in Cleves. They'd not been afraid for their lives in too long.

"Does it go any further up?" I asked. "If they can't even bring Malanza into the plot, it's dead in the water."

"If they continued down this path," Komena said, "they will be as well."

"More sinister than humorous, but not half bad," I absent-mindedly praised.

Yeah, that the literal goddesses of murder and theft that were my patronesses would not look kindly upon their so-called allies planning to turn on them had been a given. I was not unaware, either, that they were in no way above calling back the forces under Rumena from Cleves and leaving the Procerans high to dry. It'd be a disaster both militarily and diplomatically speaking, but the Crows had no interest in playing nice with people sizing them up for a knife in the back. They'd cut ties with the Principate without batting an eye, if it came to that.

"The First Prince was told," Andronike said.

My fingers clenched around the arms of my chair.

"You're sure?" I asked.

The shadows shifted once more.

—

Humans, bearing the emblem of a red lion. Magelings, surrounding the Princess Malanza. They speak into the scrying bowl, believing themselves safe behind their wards. They are not, for the Lord of Silent Steps has brought great knowledge into the Night as to treading through without tripping.

"Gaspard is pushing hard, Your Highness," Princess Rozala said. "But he's toed the line carefully so I've no grounds to come down him. He's still gathering support but the notion is a popular one."

"It would permanently alienate the Empire Ever Dark," the First Prince of Procer's voice replied. "And perhaps Callow as well. If the Black Queen did not slaughter everyone involved first, that is. I do not suppose he spoke to this?"

"There's a lot of heroes who don't believe she'll survive the war," Princess Rozala said. "And with his daughter in the Mirror Knight's bed, he gets to hear every rumour going around the Chosen. Callow under Vivienne Dartwick is a beast with a lot less bite, Gaspard argues."

A long silence.

"I cannot step in," the First Prince said. "Already the heartlands are chafing under the taxes and levies, there will be accusations of tyranny if I begin imprisoning princes over mere words. Let them plot, Princess Rozala. It will be seen to at a time of our choosing."

—

It took a moment to gather my bearings. That turned to anger quickly enough, that Hasenbach was once more failing as an ally because of the Principate's fucking internal politics. I mastered myself, though, and took a calming drag from my pipe. Procer was, undeniably, bearing the worst of the weight of the fight against the Dead King. It was its lands being ravaged, its people being conscripted and its traders being taxed into poverty. It was even its princes falling into debt. Callow and Levant, meanwhile, had sent north largely professional armies and while we'd felt the burden of war neither had suffered attacks from Keter. Procer, I then silently corrected, was bearing the worst of the weight among *human* nations. The Firstborn had been fighting against Keter in earnest for two years, and they'd had no reinforcements for any of it. But they were also fighting very far away, and people were people.

Sacrifices earned less gratitude when you didn't get to see them happening.

"The two most prominent women in Procer don't back the plot," I said. "And it's years away, besides. You've reason to be angry, and I'll be taking up the issue when I next see Hasenbach, but it's hardly a crisis."

"An undeniable and weighty precedent for the Firstborn being reasonable, restrained actors," Andronike said, mimicking my voice perfectly as I repeated words I'd once spoken to the Sisters.

"When we refrained from taking Twilight, you promised us our restraint would bring forth results," Komena croaked.

"I'd have you fight this war in a manner that doesn't guarantee having to fight another one in twenty years with your current allies," Andronike said, eerily imitating my every intonation from back then without flaw.

"And yet," the youngest of the sisters said.

They were questioning the value of playing nice when faced with allies like these, whose actions might very well lead to that war in a few decades regardless of what the drow did. It went back to the lessons they'd been taught while still mortals: that restraint would always be seen as weakness, that only the strong were bargained with and strength came without mercy. Of course, they were wrong in this.

"You did get that," I pointed out without hesitation. "Sure, we might need to arrange an accident for Gaspard of Cleves in a way that can't be traced back to us a few years from now, but you're missing the point: the two most powerful people in Procer want to shut him down and will at the first good opportunity. The Empire Ever Dark is seen as *valuable*, something not to antagonize without reason. Considering the general amoral ruthlessness of Proceran diplomacy over the last centuries, that's basically weaving you a crown of flowers and asking if you're going to the fair with anyone."

I'd, uh, maybe gotten a little too enthusiastic with that last metaphor.

"*Were* you going to the fair with anyone?" Andronike asked, tone too serene for her not to be fucking with me.

Great, they were still missing the mark half the time with sarcasm but *naturally* they'd be the finest of students when it came to learning how to pull my leg.

"I had a shift at the Rat's Nest anyway," I said.

I felt Komena's gaze descend on me, somehow coming across as skeptical even coming from a bird.

"Fine," I grumpily admitted, "Duncan Brech did not, in fact, ask me to the fair."

He'd asked Lily from one of the other rooms at the orphanage, whose... charms had developed quicker and more amply than mine. Mind you if I'd had my pick of the litter I might have chosen Lily as well, so I could hardly blame him.

"Procer has not asked us to the fair either," Andronike comfortingly said.

See, if it'd been her sister I might have thought that halfway genuine but coming from her I just knew she was just having me on.

"Very droll," I said. "Thank you for passing this along, then. I'll be seeking out Hasenbach to bury it for good."

Preferably without dead bodies being involved, but that depended on how reasonable Prince Gaspard intended to be. If he was willing to bend his neck and make reparations for overreaching in this way, I'd leave it at that. Otherwise I was going to have to take some measures to express my irritation, less than subtly. If even *that* didn't make the point sink in, then I'd have to put some thought into how best to have him disappear without entangling the Mirror Knight into this mess. Tricky but not impossible, if I leaned on the White Knight to get him moved to another front and he'd not confused sleeping with the pretty Langevin girl for true love. Hells, though, why couldn't he just have stayed out of this mess? The prince would not have been so bold without a Chosen to back him. Why was it that the only Proceran hero to have any degree of sense was Roland and he was the one I *couldn't* have on the field? The Gods were pricks, as usual.

"How's Serolen?" I asked.

There really wasn't a proper, commonly accepted name for the massive forest in between Lake Netzach and the Chalice. Most maps ended at the bottom of the Kingdom of the Dead, and few people had an interest in what went on north of the human nations of Calernia. I'd seen it called the – inventively-named – Dead Wilds, the Forest of Ghosts and rather more poetically the Bleak Weald. Mapmakers tended to call it whatever they felt like, and there was no one to contradict them: it wasn't like the Dead King's legions had shared their name for it, if they even had one. Serolen was what the Firstborn had come to name the forest, and in Crepuscular it more or less meant the Duskwood. The Firstborn had fought nine battles and a hundred skirmishes before claiming the greater span of the woods, securing them enough that Sve Noc could bring down the Gloom around the edges and plunge the territory in permanent dusk.

Neshamah was perhaps the greatest sorcerer Calernia had ever known, so of course he'd found ways to pierce through the Gloom. They weren't perfect, though, and it'd enabled the Firstborn to secure their frontline and begin settling in the depths of Serolen. The first drow city on the surface still shared its name with the Duskwood, for now, but I expected that would change with time. I'd already filled the ears of the Crows with rants about why Proceran principalities and capitals sharing their name was highly inconvenient in half a dozen senses, so you might even say it'd be a religious obligation. I'd shove that in the holy book if I had to, they knew damn well.

"See for yourself," Komena said, open pride in her voice.

The shadows shifted, but this time it was not a memory that was offered up for me to tear through. I dragged myself up to my feet, teeth keeping my pipe in place, and walked over what had been made to seem like the evening sky. Below me, misty woods shrouded in shadow spread out as far as the eye could see. The ground fell beneath my feet as we closed in on the Duskwood, my old calcified fear of heights sending a familiar pang up my leg. What I found beneath the mists had me smiling, though. The sigils of the Everdark had come together under the Ten Generals and their great cabal of the Exodus, whose founders were Sve Noc themselves, and the results were a wonder. An empire's worth of looted wealth had been made into a city at the heart of the gloomy woods, temples of stone and millennia-old steles held up by trees coaxed through Night to serve as stairs and roads and a hundred other things. Within the bark had been nestled precious stones and obsidian, while leaves around the sacred places were painted with colourful prayers and poems.

It was a city like none I'd ever seen, like *no one* had ever seen, made up from the stolen parts of half a dozen cities who'd once been among the most glorious of this land. And everywhere among the labyrinthine lay of its 'streets' the Firstborn were living. Sleeping and haggling and brewing their horrid drinks, making lizardscale clothes and harvesting the mushrooms from the deeps that'd spread like the plague. Waters had been diverted from half a dozen streams, and stolen lakes brought from their ancient homes, making the entire span richly watered and leading into an artificial lake at the heart of Serolen. There the great temple that had once been the soul of the Empire Ever Dark, the seat of the Twilight Sages and where Sve Noc had struck their ill-fated bargain with Below, stood tall. Entire flocks of crows like the ones on my shoulders perched there, ever-hungry and ever-watchful shards of godhood. I let out a low, impressed whistle after taking my pipe in hand.

"That's new," I said, pointing towards the great temple. "I didn't know you'd looted that."

"All of Holy Tvarigu is within us," Andronike replied.

"It's coming along nicely," I approved. "Do you intend to keep a strong presence up here even after the war?"

"There would be advantages," Komena said. "Like the nearness of the Chain of Hunger."

Words to make a Lycaonese choke, that, but it made sense. To the drow, yearly ratling raids would be like a fresh harvest of Night coming over and asking to be scythed through.

"We've got time yet," I said. "Might be worth speaking with the First Prince when you decide on where you'll raise your cities. She'll be better placed than I to point out the northern trade arteries of Procer."

I received no acknowledgement of my words save for the two of them taking flight and landing on my shoulders, sharp talons digging into my flesh. I put my pipe back into my mouth and took a drag, spewing the smoke upwards just to spite them. It was time, it seemed.

"All right," I said afterward. "Show me the war."

I steeled myself and the shadows spun.

Horror swallowed me whole.

Chapter 12: Contest

"The enemy's come to die on this field, my friends, for an awful prince and terrible pay. We, on the other hand, have come to die on this field for a terrible prince and awful pay. That the Heavens are on our side ought to be evident."

– Captain Thierry the Acerbic, addressing his company before the infamously bloody Battle of Motte-aux-Foins

Anticipation hung in the air like smoke.

The sigil of the Seventh General, Vesena Spear-Biter, was painted on thousands of stretches of dark cloth hanging from arms and armour and even hair: two jagged, monstrous fangs tearing at what looked like a thunderbolt of iron. Red and white set on black, it was eye-catching and when the breeze blew through the outskirts of Serolen a sea of pale teeth biting into iron stirred with it. These were not the drow from the Outer Rings I'd once fought, the dregs of the dreg-empire. No, the Vesena came armoured in iron and obsidian, bearing polished cuirasses and helmets shaped like angled bat wings. Tough *tezkuze* leather, those massive hard-skinned blind lizards who could eat even Mighty should they prove reckless, had been fashioned into trousers and long-sleeved vests

touched by tinkling bracelets and sculpted greaves of stone or dull iron. There was an order to this host of the Firstborn, unlike in most of their kind, for in the days of the old Empire Ever Dark the Mighty Vesena Spear-Biter had been known as the 'Relentless General Whose Victories Flow Like A River'.

The Vesena were not so much a sigil as they were the last field army of the ancient Empire Ever Dark, kept standing through the ages by sheer dint of the Spear-Biter's brutal murder of all rivals and naysayers. Time had taken its toll, and warriors now stood where once soldiers had, but there was no closer among the Firstborn to a professional army than the Vesena Sigil. It had occupied the whole of the city of Great Noglof, before leaving with the Exodus, and made the entire city into a bustling army camp – kept going by the plunder in Night and gifts and food that was brought back by the fighting drow of the sigil after every campaign. Even now, a discerning eye could make out what had been the components of a field army simply from the way the warriors were equipped.

First came long stretches of skirmishers, bearing hard bucklers of iron painted with their sigil while long barbed javelins hung from their backs and short blades were kept at their hips. Dzulu, most of them, but the Vesena were one of the rare sigils that *taught* Secrets to their own and so they all shared a deadly blackflame trick that allowed them to have quite the sting to them. Behind them came hunters, those that would have been infantry regulars in olden days. These stood in companies of nine times nine each led by the least of the Mighty, an ispe, and were armed as I had only ever seen the Watch be armed: though they bore long swords of Night-forged steel on the flanks, they also held horn bows. Short, stout and curved these little wonders were no match for a good Deoraithe longbow but they fired at surprising range – regular arrows would be next to useless against the dead, of course, so the Vesena had adapted by infusing obsidian arrowheads with Night in a way that made them burst on impact.

At heart of the army stood the finest warriors of the Vesena, three thousand hulking towering shapes whose shells of iron-joined obsidian left no opening at all from head to toe. The Ebonclad were a cabal of their own within the Vesena, each and everyone a jawor that drew on Night to breathe and see through the sealed armour and wield their large stone-and-steel maces. As another exotic addition, the Vesena Sigil also boasted no less than ten of the hulking things called *zanikzen*, the famed annihilation-engines that Mighty Ysengral had gone to war nine times to steal only to be driven back every time. House-sized and made entirely of bone and onyx, they looked like two-wheeled carts holding up the fused bones of a hundred ancient drow whose wretched half-seen silhouettes ended up pointing their hands towards the horizon and forming a gaping maw filled with spear-

like spikes of onyx. As field siege engines I deemed to be to be inferior to what the Empire and Callow used, but they'd been murderously proficient at defending tunnels.

And in the very middle of the army, seated atop a writhing living throne made of once-Mighty foes stripped of Night so thoroughly they became nisi, Mighty Vesena the Spear-Biter waited. Though it would have been as ravaged by age as Rumena in appearance, being its senior, the long stripe scars going down its face made it impossible to tell what it might once have looked like. It wore an armoured cuirass of obsidian over flowing pale cloth, needles of bone woven into its pale long hair to keep it in an elaborate bun. It claimed for only a weapon a long-handled axe – so long as to be half as tall as they – whose head was steel so deeply imbued with Night it flickered around it like smoke. Around it an honour guard of rylleh stood, clad in bright colours, but the lesser Mighty had been spread among the host as commanders of dzulu. The Sisters had once told me that most titles among the Mighty had once been military ranks in the Empire Ever Dark, for the soldiers had been among the first to thrive in the nights after the end of the Twilight Sages, and the Vesena in a way kept closest that that old truth.

There were twenty thousand, all in all: but a fifth of the might of the Vesena Sigil, but its sharpest fangs were all bared here, spread amongst the trees. Facing them was only deep darkness and the mists of the Gloom. Open grounds for six hundred feet after the end of the forest, which struck me as having been the Dead King's picked battlefield: the dead fared poorly in the woods. Against, drow, anyway.

"They haven't even dug ditches," I frowned. "Sloppy. Ysengral would have done better."

Mighty Ysengral, the Cradle of Steel, had distinguished themselves to my eye as the finest of the Firstborn generals even if they were towards the lower end of the Ten Generals when it came to raw power. Considering it was debatable where Rumena would rank second or third among them, though, that was still nothing to sneer at.

"Ysengral was defending the Wilting March from another breakthrough," Komena said, and I almost shivered.

Standing to my left, eyes silver-blue and form little more than flickering shadow, the image of what had once been a mortal woman was sharing the sights with me. Before I took my eye off her, every time I glimpsed a long-fanged skull beneath the shadows that was always gone if I tried to find it. There was a twang of something like iron and blood to her voice, something I could not help but taste against the roof of my mouth. Komena wore armour, and a sword at her hip. She was the Youngest Night.

"We did not foresee the Hidden Horror until it was edging into the Gloom," Andronike said, her voice coming from my right.

Her eyes, too, burned pale blue. But over her face flickered the shape of the iron mask she had once worn as one of the Twilight Sages, and the thick billowing cloak she had decked herself in almost seemed like dark-feathered wings whenever she moved. There were strings twined among her fingers, which she ever twined. The affect to her words was subtler, like a drink thought harmless until your tongue was felt to be numb. She was the Oldest Night.

"You didn't get time to dig in," I put together. "Vesena was the closest?"

"Kurosiv," Komena replied, shaking her head. "But its horde was spread out. Vesena was ready for war."

"He's able to slip past your scouts with entire armies now," I whispered.

Shit. If they could only tell that the Dead King was attacking when he was beginning to breach the Gloom, then that gave them what – half a day to mobilize at most? They'd either have to permanently garrison a significant portion of their forces to defend all the southern stretches of Serolen, which would cripple their ability raid into Keter's territory, or start breaking through whatever means he used to obscure the movements of his armies on this front. I would have pursued the matter in conversation, but was robbed of the opportunity: the battle was beginning. It started with a sound like the whistle of a falling arrow, though utterly deafening. Then flashes of blinding light scythed through the mist in five places, like a titan's raking claws, and for a moment the passage between Keter and Serolen was forced open by the sorceries of the Dead King. In that heartbeat, long ladders of steel with spiked ends fell through the open space and buried deep in the ground, the runes carved on the glowing bright. Like a steel road, one meant to keep the gap open.

"Second through sixth," Mighty Vesena said, voice ringing out. "Wail."

The Crows and I were standing by its side and so we'd seen its eyes had not blinked, not even when the light had been at its brightest. Five of the massive *zanikzen* lit up, thousands of glyphs in Crepuscular craved into the bones unveiled, and as crews attended to the large engines I saw heat waft of the surface and half the body of a nisi too close to the maw turn to ash. Heat shimmered between the onyx spikes, near-invisible lances of impossibly hot air shooting out and lashing out at the ladders in a lazy, low arc. The needles went abruptly still afterwards, forcing out a strange sound like a hundred inhuman wails. The first to get hit dented, and its front melted like

summer snow, but the dead had moved quick enough to contest three of the remaining four. Ghouls who'd moved forward like lightning threw themselves in the way, embracing annihilation to curb the blow, and though one of the lances tore through and broke a ladder's end in a spray of earth the other two held. The dead had three beachheads. Further down the line, another five bursts of light signaled that Keter was broadening its offensive.

"Two by breach," Mighty Vesena ordered.

Even as the drow annihilation-engines began hammering at the fresh beachheads, the Vesena Sigil began its advance without needing to be told.

"They're impressively disciplined, for a sigil," I admitted, eyes remaining on the battle.

"Vesena made of the old western army regulation a set of holy rites," Komana told me, sounding fond. "All who break them are said to have broken faith with the sigil and are free to be slain."

I'd gathered that Vesena Spear-Biter was a darling of hers, which didn't surprise me all that much. Komana did tend to favour the old warhorses who'd survived the collapse of the Empire Ever Dark.

The ever-relentless dead had wasted no time getting through their protection for the three ladders that'd landed: shield-soldiers the size of ogres in heavy plate, protecting in a ring the more vulnerable mages putting up translucent shields of sorcery preventing repeating fire from the engines from getting through. With the second wave, if Keter's usual northern doctrine held, would come another circle of corpse-mages to attempt to raise rough but swiftly functional wards that'd make it hard work dislodging the dead from that position. The Firstborn were well aware of that, of course. Even as the first rank of a shield wall formed beyond the beachheads the drow skirmishers finished closing in the distance. Javelins flew whistling, the drow never breaking stride or slowing as they threw, the barbed ends hitting the shields of the dead with dull thumps before exploding in black flames of Night.

The shield walls broke, shattered like overripe fruits as the the first line of skirmishers unsheathed swords and wading into close combat. The lines behind disrupted the gathering dead with further throws, enabling the nimble drow to slip through the gaps in the defences of the dead. Mighty Vesena had been, I gathered, one of the few Firstborn generals to win victories against the dwarves during the war that broke the Empire Ever Dark. It had typically won those victories by hitting the heavy-armoured but slow-moving dwarven armies with crippling blows while they were in movement, never allowing them to deploy the siege engines and

harsh sorceries that'd shattered so many drow armies. Traces of that mindset could still be seen here I decided as I watched the drow skirmishers of what the expanding assault of the Dead King had made the right wing slink their way deeper behind the lines of Keter.

Their objective here was clear: hitting the dead mages putting up shields before a second wave could set up wards, then prying away the Dead King's breaches from him one after another. It was a much more aggressive defence than Ysengral was prone to waging, or even the other general I was most familiar with: Radosa. The Hushing Dread actually preferred letting the greater strength of the dead past the Gloom before striking at the weakened defences of the breaches, picking off the enemies at its leisure within the forest. Its battles lasted twice as long as everyone else's, but then it also counted about a third of the casualties most the time.

"He's fought Vesena before," I grimaced. "And no one else uses the blackflame skirmishers. If you use the same tricks against the Hidden Horror too many times..."

In the distance another set of blinding lights shone. And again. And again. *You're going to run out of skirmishers before he runs out of cabals capable of making those, Vesena*, I grimaced. And I would give the Spear-Biter its due, the first three breaches the Dead King had forced through were swept back. The skirmishers were just a little too slow, a flow of reinforcing armoured Binds pulling them down and slaughtering them to the last, but, a second wave of longsword bearing warriors carved their way to the mages before the second wave could put up wards, helped through by the focused arrow-fire of their brethren. They slipped into shadow and danced around the bone-giants, artists at their work, but what was three beachheads when another ten had just dropped in the span it took to clear them? The right flank had gone quiet, but the wailing of the *zanikzen* was the herald of strife spreading to the left and the centre. The Vesena redeployed with impressive swiftness, as a well-oiled machine, but this time when the skirmishers hit the first wave of beachheads they found they were expected.

Through the black flames leapt out slender, almost insect-like silhouettes.

"Hexenghouls," I whispered.

Shit, Neshamah really wasn't pulling punches here. Those nasty little things weren't like most ghouls: swift and passingly intelligent in a way that allowed them serve as both harassers and a sort of replacement for the Dead King's general lack of cavalry. No, these were almost as smart as people. Hexenghouls, named by the Lycaonese, were good at two thing only: killing, and disrupting magic by their mere presence. They had hardened bronze

rods instead of bones, enchanted in a way that Masego told me destabilized the structure of spell formulas when they got close enough. Those vicious beasts were the reason Lycaonese mages were relatively rare while as a people they had much reason to keep magical bloodlines going. Every year, scaling through passes and mountains, those monsters made it into the lowlands and went *hunting*. Tonight, deployed in numbers I'd rarely before seen, they went through the skirmishers like a sickle through wheat. The few dzulu who were quick enough to call on Night found they couldn't focus it properly and were massacred within moments.

Night was not sorcery, but evidently the Dead King had been adjusting what he ordered carved onto those bronze rods.

The second wave of longswords drove them back, even if they destroyed but a handful, but by the time the hexenghoul retreated behind them stood a heavy shield wall of skeletons. Too heavy to punch through in time: valiantly the warriors threw themselves against it, but Neshamah's second wave of mages came through. Wards came up and then, with a position finally secure, the dead began unleashing their real offensives. Beorns tumbled through, carelessly stamping through the skeletons, and spat out the corpses they held within them in the middle of drow ranks. Dzulu could do nothing against the likes of those, much less the even more heavily armoured 'tusks'. Those were a recent addition to Keter's arsenal, rarely seen on my front: catapult-sized necromantic constructs shaped rather like boards, unlike many of the Hidden Horror's creations they held within then no lesser dead. They were instead filled with *rocks*, and in front of them jagged tusks of steel were meant to make them into moving battering rams designed to crack open shield walls.

Going against drow foot? They trampled straight through those lines like they weren't even there.

"Now," I murmured, "for the tug-of-war."

With a slew of fresh casualties, Night and necromancy came out. Even as the officers-Mighty destroyed the war-constructs or died trying, the mage cadres of Keter competed with drow as to whether corpses would get up as undead or be emptied of Night first. The undead drow could not use Night, but they *would* explode with what they'd held when their corpses were shattered. It wreaked havoc on the attempt to keep a battle line going to have your own dead blow up on you when you drove them back. Not that there was much of a battle line: at best it could be said that there was a line where the Vesena and the dead met. And where half a hundred Firstborn must have died with every passing beat. Behind it was an ugly chaos of Mighty and war-constructs tangling in duels that paid no heed to the warriors around them. For all that Vesena Spear-Biter had mimicked the ways of the old armies of the Empire Ever Dark, it was only that: a mimicry. The Mighty were not true

officers, they were chieftains who ceased paying mind to their own companies the moment there was a great foe for them to fight.

"Using the Mighty as construct-killers instead of officers works better," I noted, brow creasing at the sight. "If the Spear-Biter sent packs of pravnat and jawor after the beorns and the tusks they could be put down much quicker. Instead they keep running into isolated ispe and pravnat and overwhelming them."

Vesena's strategy being a success had depended on breaking through the initial defence of the breaches and shutting them down before casualties could mount, but that'd failed. Now the attempt by its sigil to push through the dead was turning into the sort of meat grinder that could utterly destroy an army if a general got stubborn. With the centre and the left wing taking such a beating, the Vesena were forced to thin their right flank to reinforce the lines that'd been devastated by constructs. And even then, the remaining skirmishers were now pointless going around through the woods in a far-flung circle that might allow them to eventually flank the left wing of the dead but practically speaking would just take them out of the battle for the rest of its span. Mistake, that. They'd have been more useful kept anchoring the thinning right flank in my opinion.

"The Vesena are inflicting great losses on the dead," Andronike replied.

"Sure," I dismissed. "Those officer-Mighty are pure slaughter against Keter's Bones and Binds. No denying that."

It was hard to, when all it took was for even an ispe, the lowest of the Mighty, to reach the shield wall of the dead to contemptuously crack it open.

"And I don't mean to dismiss what's being achieved here," I continued. "At this point Mighty Vesena had lost what, three or four thousand?"

"Closer to four," Komena told me.

"And it's cost the Dead King more than three score of his finest war-constructs, on top of at least thrice that in foot," I said. "The problem here is that while Vesena's sigil is killing the enemy, it's not doing it in a way that wins the battle."

I pointed at the worst of the slaughter, where the lines were going back and forth.

"They've been gaining and losing the same thirty feet since the battle started in earnest," I pointed out. "Maybe this battle can be won, at this exchange rate of lives for undead, but it'd be pissing away the war to keep fighting it this way. Packs of

Mighty striking together allows for decisive blows in a way spreading them out cannot."

"General Rumena said much the same," Andronike said. "Though it did mention that Vesena's methods would function significantly better when on the offensive instead."

I narrowed my eyes. Yeah, I could maybe see that. As an offensive army they'd be smashing through whatever forces the Dead King could put in their way, which tended to be light on war-constructs, and if they ran into a few of those then the same rylleh that'd yet to move so much as an inch would be able to handle them.

"Might be," I muttered.

The battle was going badly for the Vesena, even a fool could have seen it, but to the Spear-Biter it must seem like it could still be turned around. The *zanikzen* had polished off every breach they could, leaving only the four whose wards had been raised, so they began pounding at the dead instead. Every burst of burning heat swatted down entire companies, and the crews prudently aimed them far behind the fighting so there'd be no risk of hitting their own. They wouldn't be able to handle that rate of fire for long, not without risking the engines blowing up, but then they'd didn't really need to. The superbly aimed hits slackened the pressure of the dead against the drow and, sensing an opening, Mighty Vesena sent in its finest. The Ebonclad advanced, flowing forward silently as if they were gliding over the ground. Signals went up in the sky, woven in Night, and a corridor was opened for them to strike cleanly at the dead. The sight of it was... I let out a sharp breath, genuinely impressed. It was like watching a hammer strike at an egg: clad in ebony armours sealed by melted iron, the Ebonclad were untouchable to the dead. Their large war maces, on the other hands, released waves of Night whenever they struck and so pulped the dead straight through their armour.

The tusks and beorns that'd not been handled were struck at in groups of then, methodically and cleanly if with little regard to the collateral damage against the dzulu. That armour did not seem to hinder them sinking into pools of shadows, and they even seemed to have greater control over the trick than most: they sometimes slunk up the beasts and let only the upper half of their body emerge from the shadow, striking at the necromantic constructs with impunity.

"Impressed?" Komena asked.

"They're exceptional," I acknowledged. "But Vesena just got played the fool."

It'd been baited into committing its finest troops before Keter slapped its last cards on the table.

"Oh?" Andronike hummed.

This battle had already taken place, so they knew what had taken place while I was left to guess. But while Akua might have pointed out to me that the Dead King had grown to learn my tricks, the opposite was true as well.

"We haven't seen Revenants yet," I said. "When we do, I wager things will swiftly proceed downhill."

The Ebonclad smashed their way through the dead on two of the breaches and began making serious assaults on two of the warded beachheads, but I bade my time and counted up to seventeen before my cynicism was 'rewarded'.

Like great raking claws, five lights burned again where the battle had begun. On the right flank that'd been so weakened reinforcing the others.

"Vesena just lost this battle," I grimly said.

Though the *zanikzen* were on the edge of breaking apart, they still fired unflinching at the fresh breaches. Two per breach, as Mighty Vesena had early ordered. Or so they attempted. Three of the annihilation-engines went up in storms of ashen heat, killing the crews instantly, and one aborted its shot. Still, every breach received a direct shot just as the rune-inscribed ladders came down and one even received two. That one broke. The other four held, protected by what looked like swarms of ghouls nailed to the ends as a grisly shield. With the army already too committed down the line, it would have been a disaster to try to redeploy. So instead Mighty Vesena sent into the breaches what few regulars it had left, and with them sent its hardest hitters: it sent out rylleh. Unfortunately, the Dead King had picked his timing exquisitely. Before the rylleh were halfway there, Revenants strode out of the warded breaches and tore into the Ebonclad. Half of the rylleh had to be recalled, which made a mess of things.

"So that's where the Stitcher went," I muttered.

A castle-sized abomination made from the bodies of half a dozen horrors put together – the scales and bones of a dragon, what looked like the heads of at least three sea snakes, the heavy fur and leather of rattling Ancient Ones – was butchering its way through the Ebonclad, even swatted down a rylleh that got too close. The Revenant was inside, and damnably hard to put down. We hadn't seen her in a year, so I'd hoped the Blade of Mercy had damaged her beyond use in their last tangle, but it seemed not. Hanno was convinced she'd been a healer before the Hidden Horror got his hands on her, which somehow made it all even more horrifying. Even as I watched, Mighty Vesena tried to stabilize the situation by firing its remaining annihilation-engines

directly into the Revenants, but that caught only one and killed a few hundred of the Ebonclad in the exchange. Bad trade, the Seventh General was losing its cool.

Even worse the rylleh who reached the fresh beachheads were not, to their surprise and mine, greeted by swarms of ghouls or skeletons. Awaiting them were dead mages and large pots of metal, heated and filled with two things: necromantic sorcery and steel scraps. Like sharpeners they blew, the cursed metals ignoring most defenses that could be put up by Night, and I winced when I saw not one but three rylleh go down. They got up shortly, of course: rylleh were harder to kill than that, and even if one had actually died that probably wouldn't have kept drow of that tier out of the battle for long. But the corpse-mages were bearing strange metal staffs, and though I could see no visible mark of sorcery being employed the three rylleh that'd been struck down... stayed down.

"Weeping Heavens," I murmured. "Has he found a way to shut down the Night?"

"Not quite," Andronike said, voice grown cold. "Those staffs were made of an alloy of tin and antimony, and strangely enchanted – they did not disrupt Night, or end it, which we could have fought. They directed it away from our warriors, down into the earth."

And moments later, petty ghouls they would otherwise have been able to slaughter by the hundreds began tearing into the downed rylleh. They devoured their flesh so that they would never recover from that death. Gods, I fucking hated fighting the Dead King. There was always another nasty trick just waiting to be unveiled. Binds began pouring of the breaches, forming up under arrow fire by the increasingly outnumbered and outflanked Vesena. This was going to turn from a defeat into a disaster, if something wasn't done soon, and I wasn't the only one to see it.

The Seventh General, Vesena Spear-Biter, took the field personally.

I did not even see them move until they were standing before the Stitcher, long axe resting against the shoulder.

"Sa vrede?" Mighty Vesena asked of the Revenant.

Are you worthy? I shivered to hear my words spoken by one of the ancient monsters of the Firstborn, taken as writ of faith. Whether in fear or thrill – or perhaps both – I could not be certain. Vesena received no answer, and as the stitched up necks and heads of sea snakes struck out at it the Seventh General vanished into shadows and emerged atop the monster. The axe came down, head biting into the dragon scales, and inside the beast a sea of Night cut through. Split in two, the Stitcher's monster

poured our blood, guts and strange liquids of many colours. Inside a dead young woman screamed and the corpses of the drow began gathering to her, forming another shell, but Mighty Vesena landed before the Revenant and stood knee-deep in guts and blood. Its shoulder twitched, once, twice and then it proved why it had earned the sobriquet of *Spear-Biter*. I'd thought it a reference to mere spears, once, but that was not the case. Vesena had once warred against an ancient sigil-holder that'd unearthed and partially repaired one of the ancient wonders of the Empire Ever Dark, a great tower of arcane-forged steel that gathered lightning into itself and spewed it in a constant storm around itself. The steel walls had been thirty feet deep, surrounded by constant death, and the way the tower jutted out from a deep pit in the Inner Ring had led Firstborn to call it the Spear.

Night pouring out of it as it twitched, Mighty Vesena screamed in pain and its mouth unhinged, revealing a bestial maw as large as the sigil-holder itself had been. Bat-like wings tore out of its back, and even as the Stitcher tried to form a grisly homunculus of drow corpses roiling with Night the horrid creature Vesena had turned itself onto unhinged its great jaw even further and revealed glinting fangs – before biting straight through the corpses and Revenant, as it once had through thirty feet of solid steel, and swallowed the Stitcher and a bloody swath of her work whole.

Officers began calling for a retreat, heeding some unseen order, and the Vesena obeyed in largely good order. Their sigil-holder continued to sow destruction left and right, covering the retreat along with the remaining rylleh, and I slowly breathed out.

"After?" I asked.

"They pulled back and Kurosiv drowned the invaders in violence, sweeping them back to the breaches, then broke the wards personally," Andronike said, her voice betraying little of her opinion of that Mighty.

Mighty Kurosiv the All-Knowing, the Second General. It rarely bothered with deeper tactics than throwing warriors at the enemy but given the absurd amount of those within its sigil that tended to work regardless. I found the way it benefited from the deaths of its own and so encouraged them to be rather disgusting, and I suspected the Sisters felt rather the same for different reasons: Kurosiv had found a way to grow fat as a parasite nestled in the heart of the Night, exploiting the system they had built as no one else had before or since. Rumena had allegedly taken it as enough of a threat it'd exterminated its first five sigils, earning the epithet of Tomb-maker in the process, but it was telling that in the end it was not Kurosiv that'd settled in the Outer Rings.

"Three other battles were fought that very same night, Queen of Lost and Found," Komena said.

The images flickered quickly through my mind, almost a memory shared but not quite.

Ysengral the Cradle of Steel, the Eighth General: a lipless grin and tittering laughter hiding a mind like a steel trap. And traps did it wield, mazes and madness and traps behind which stood soldiers in steel and machine of war that worked on and fed of and spat out Night. Endless bands of dead slipping through the Gloom, testing the defences day and night.

Ishabog the Adversary, the Fourth General: ever-moving, ever-restless, a spear and song on the lip and a glint in its eye. Only Mighty may have the right to call themselves of the Ishabog, and mighty was their calling: always one against ten, ten against a hundred, a hundred against a thousand. Vicious creatures made of dead flesh hunting through darkened woods in packs, hunted in turn.

Radhoste the Dreamer, the Sixth General: a bed of stone like a sepulcher, carried by rigid in dread. Eyes closed but seeing, a mind that spans miles and sifts through the sleeping and the dead. A hundred battles fought with the Enemy like a fencer on the field, back and forth ever going for the throat as a thousand die with every hour.

All happening, all being fought.

"Remind Cordelia Hasenbach that she will be fighting *those* battles as well, if she does not leash her lackeys," Komena hissed in my ear.

And in the heartbeat that followed, they were gone. Dawn shyly peeked through the flaps of my tent, and I eyed my shaking hands before sighing.

So much for getting a good night's sleep before leaving.

Interlude: Truce

"Raise the price by a coin of gold and you make enemies; raise the price by a copper and you make losses. Profit lies in silver: moderation without timidity."

– Extract from 'Discourse on Nature and Man', by Merchant Princess Adorabella

Above the foyer of the royal quarters in Rhenia hung a painting – six feet long, four feet high – depicting the famous ancient Iron King Konrad wrestling with what the artist had deemed a personification of the concept of duty.

Cordelia sometimes thought of that painting, when the days grew long. At first, when she grew from girlhood into womanhood, she had remembered it for the stories her uncle had had told her about it. Of how her father, a man she'd never known, had despised it ever since he was a boy and had it taken down the same day he became Prince of Rhenia. He'd been known to claim he would sell it to some art-hungry Alamans princeling in the south and use the gold to buy a few more dwarven engines, though he'd never gotten around to it before his untimely death. Cordelia's mother had eventually ordered it put back up, being rather fond of it, though she'd called the motif 'Konrad Getting Beat By A Bald Bear' instead. Sometimes Cordelia thought she'd only ever truly known her parents through the stories of others, for even though she'd been fourteen when her mother passed away Cordelia had only been graced to know a meagre few facets of Margaret Papenheim.

Now that years had passed, though, she thought more of the motif. Not of Old King Konrad, who stories told had let all eight of his children die rather than surrender Twilight's Pass, but of what lay at a heart of it: a prince, wrestling with duty. Was that not, in a way, what lay at the heart of rule? To bear a crown was to swear yourself to making order out of chaos, law out of anarchy, prosperity out of ruin. Cordelia had been orderly even as a little girl, for Mother had never been prone to coddling: it had been up to her to decide how her hours would be spent when she was not seeing to her duties. She'd taken on seneschal duties for the fortress-city by the age of twelve and extended her authority to Rhenia's dependencies by the age of thirteen, and as her writ ran further her hours became ever more precious and in need of careful parcelling. Those habits had followed her into adulthood, into the Salia and her rule as First Prince of Procer, and she was grateful for it.

There was simply so much to *do* and too little time for all of it. Cordelia would try anyway and parcel out ever ounce of her so that, at least, all that she could do was done. The First Prince of Procer delicately nibbled at the caramelized poultry she'd been served, then took a sip of no more than two beats from her cup of water – obeying court etiquette to the letter. The two men seated across from her, who had patiently been waiting for her to finish her bite and rinse it down, only then began speaking again.

"Merchant Prince Fabianus has signalled he will not involve himself in matters of Proceran debt," Louis of Sartrons told her. "We've established this is a firm commitment, and not a bargaining position."

The old spy's face had always struck her as being rather skeletal, skin pulled taut against the bones of an aristocratic face and only topped by ever-receding tufts of hair. He was not a

physically striking man, looking more like a well-born coin counter than what he truly was: the foremost patron of the Circle of Thorns, the secretive society whose agents were the eyes and ears of the Principate abroad. Louis of Sartons was not a close ally of hers, for the Circle preferred to maintain a degree of distance so that it would not be swept into internal struggles and so suffer in a way that blinded Procer to its enemies, but he had come out boldly to support her when a coup had been attempted against Cordelia. For this he'd earned a degree of trust, and a freer hand than she'd allowed him before. The news he was bringing, however, were not pleasant ones.

"That is a blade that bites both ways," Cordelia mused.

Most of the Merchant Princes and Princesses that ruled Mercantis were not Named, and rarely more than influential firsts among equals, yet their value as intermediaries with the banks and merchant houses of the city they ruled was priceless – if always priced. That Fabianus was had formally stepped back from intervening in the matter massive loans that Mercantis had extended both Procer and the Grand Alliance meant he would not demand that the sums, lenders and borrowers be made public within the Consortium as a growing number of merchants now demanded. It also meant, however, that he would no longer facilitate those arrangements as he had until now.

"The Circle believes he remains in favour of the arrangements but has grown to fear assassination by his opposition if he does not bend," Louis informed her. "Recusing himself allows him to give them an inch without slighting us outright."

Wiggling out was the mark of an eel, not a prince, Cordelia uncharitably thought, but what else was to be expected from Mercantis? Not that the merchants were entirely without reason to be worried of the loans extended, for the First Prince had woven there a maze to obscure exactly how badly the finances of the Principate were faring. By obtaining the permission of the Highest Assembly to seek loans in the name of its individuals princes and princesses – all marked down, and to be repaid by the Principate to the individuals in years to come – she'd been able to seek smaller loans from multiple royals in a shared 'bundle' from different banks and merchants, effectively spreading out debts in a way that made it nearly impossible to assess from the side of the lenders. The key to this had been requiring secrecy from the lenders in exchange of higher interest, something she'd had the Circle of Thorns strictly enforce.

The first two merchants who'd tried to break their written oaths had been promptly assassinated, using some of the most painful poisons the Circle knew of. None had tried after, not individually anyway: through the great merchant guild known as the Consortium, which Mercantis counted as both a court of law

and ruling body second only to their Merchant Prince, pressured was being applied for the hidden information being made available not to individuals but to the Consortium 'itself'. It was a legal fiction, given that nearly all those who'd signed to secrecy were also members of the Consortium, but one that might hold up under the few treaties Mercantis kept with Procer. That even Merchant Prince Fabianus was beginning to give way was bad omen for the Grand Alliance's fortunes in the city. Possibly quite literally.

"This is no longer a purely Proceran matter," the First Prince eventually said.

The older man bowed his head in acknowledgement, and with a look Cordelia made for one of her attendants to approach. The young woman curtsied, then silently awaited instructions.

"Please request of Ingrid that she inquire whether Lady Dartwick would be amenable to having tea," she began, and for a heartbeat considered when she could first spare the time, "tomorrow, an hour past Noon Bell."

"Immediately, Your Most Serene Highness," her attendant replied.

Ghislaine, Cordelia suddenly remembered, repeating the name in her mind to better commit it to memory.

"Thank you, *Ghislaine*," she smiled, and the woman curtsied again.

Vivienne Dartwick would not have the authority or influence to settle such a matter herself, but needed to be brought into the issue as the first step into bringing in Catherine Foundling. The Black Queen, Cordelia thought a touch guiltily, really was such a useful large club to threaten people with. Where law and diplomacy failed to make a mark, Queen Catherine's scowls and fearsome reputation had a way of bringing out sweet reason from the most unreasonable of souls. Callow would, besides, need to be told of the developments regardless: its treasury was guarantor to some of the loans extended to the Grand Alliance and it was the second-largest contributor to the war chest besides. Not that Lady Dartwick had not ensured the kingdom would not benefit from the process. If anything, she'd proved frighteningly cunning in finding ways of seeing to that.

The notion of allowing repayment in nature for extended loans had, for one, effectively erased twenty years of damage to Callowan horse-rearing while simultaneously thinning the hordes of their traditional greatest rivals in the trade, the Arlesite princes of the south. If Queen Vivienne was to be her neighbour to the east, one day, Cordelia would not make the mistake of taking her lightly. The former Chosen might in truth have better gifts for ruling in years of peace than the woman who'd chosen her for a successor. The blonde princess had another bite of poultry, savouring the subtle aftertaste of the sauce, and then a

nibble of those perfectly steamed and spiced carrots. It was washed away with a sip of water, afterwards, and even as she dabbed her lips with an embroidered cloth the First Prince cleared her mind of unnecessary thoughts.

The matters that would be brought to her attention by Brother Simon of Gorgeault, formerly the head of the Holy Society and nowadays the Lord Inquisitor of Procer, would require her full attention as well. Though the well-formed man with the hair grown silver was no longer the leader of the society of highborn lay brothers and sisters, it was because at Cordelia's incitation the Highest Assembly had charged him instead to root out corruption and wickedness within the ranks of the House of Light, granting him worldly authority over the priests until his *inquisition* was at an end. It was reform at the edge of a sword, all knew this, but after so many of the Holies had been caught publicly backing her deposal the House had not had room to argue.

"The House of Light has formally decided to accept your latest set of suggestions," Brother Simon said, a tad drily. "The lands will be ceded to the throne, under condition that they are to be ceded in turn to the appropriate crowns."

Cordelia was too well-mannered to smile in triumph, so instead she drank a sip of water. With that last concession, it could be said that she had subdued the Holies and the uglier aspects of the House of Light they represented. Even after the public disgrace of the House during the Salian coup attempt, it would have been a grave overreach to come down too hard on it where the people could see: it would restore public sympathy, and feed into the perception that she had a tyrant's grip on the Principate. Instead, she had struck more subtly. First she'd abolished every ritual power the House had over the office of First Prince and the Highest Assembly itself, save for the right to directly petition the latter – one of the oldest and more importantly the most *well-known* of the House's privileges. Then, with the fetters of tradition removed, she'd gone after the coin. The House was invited to divest itself of all its merchant interests, donating such wealth to the feeding of the refugees in the heartlands. The House was invited to accept taxation on its holdings, if only while the Principate was at war. And now, the Lord Inquisitor had confirmed that all the lands of the House whose purpose was commercial in nature – vineyards, orchards, mines – were to be ceded to the throne of Procer, which itself would then cede them back to the appropriate princes and princesses.

For a price, which Cordelia would mercifully offer to be paid through writing off any debt the treasury of the Principate might owe any such royalty. In the same stroke she'd ensured that her office would not go bankrupt after the war, curried favour with her subjects by restoring lands to them and ensured the Holies

would never again have the wealth to ensure the degree of influence they'd been boasting for the last century.

"The wisdom of the House illuminates the way in these dark times," Cordelia Hasenbach replied, long practice allowing her to keep even the faintest hint of irony out of her voice.

This would devour hours and hours of her days for weeks to come, but it was worth it: with a little inventiveness, she should be able to shuffle around debts and debtors to secure another round of loans abroad.

"It shines what light it can," the Lord Inquisitor agreed, both praise and warning in the same elegant turn of phrase.

Simon of Gorgeault, she sometimes thought, would have made a better prince than most if fate had deigned to grant him that birthright.

"Furthermore," Brother Simon continued, "though numbers will only arrive tomorrow, I can already tell you that another company of priests has volunteered for service on the fronts."

This, at least, Cordelia would give the honour it was due. Every Lycaonese child was taught that there could be no greater service to one's own than to put your life between them and the Enemy.

"If you have names for me, the lists can be read to the people again," Cordelia offered.

It was both a gesture of respect and a way to raise morale, which in turn tended to lead to volunteers.

"I will extend the offer to House," the Lord Inquisitor said, tone grown warmer.

That saw to the immediate matters, she grasped, and just in time. With one last touch of her fork, she brought a bite of poultry to her mouth and swallowed, washing it down with water just before the first ringing of Noon Bell in the distance. The two spies took their leave with the proper courtesies, which she duly returned, and only then did Cordelia allow her brow to crease as she looked down at her plate. There were still two mouthfuls of poultry left, and one of sides. Her timing had been off: imprecision, chaos, had won a small victory. The First Prince left the meal unfinished, and allowed herself to be led to the antechamber down the hall – where she was deftly undressed by her handmaids and helped into a dress more practical than the powder blue court regalia she'd donned for her duties of the day until now. Grey velvet was laced at her back and paired with matching shawl bordered in golden brocade in deference to the chill that occasionally seized parts of the palace.

Her escort to what her councillors had taken to naming *l'archive en vogue* – the Vogue Archive – was a familiar face. Captain Lois had been a simple guardsman, when Cordelia had thrown herself down a windowsill, and proved to be a man of his oath. He'd been among those that helped her escape, and he'd killed to ensure she would not be dragged back to Balthazar Serigny's feet as a prisoner. There were some, after the coup, who'd said that the ancient palace of the Merovins should be emptied of all Salians and only trustworthy Lycaonese be kept in her service. These calls she'd resisted, and instead ensured both honours and promotions for all the Salians who had proved loyal. She was not First Prince of the Lycaonese but of Procer, and she would not let fear taint who she was: leal service must ever be met with reward.

"If you would allow me the honour, Your Most Serene Highness?" Captain Lois offered along with his arm.

Cordelia did, though lending an arm was as far as she intended to ever indulge the flirtation. She'd had discreet liaisons over the years, with men and rather more rarely women, but becoming involved with one in her service would be... uncouth in many ways. Her own people's traditions encouraged sharing a bed with one of the 'pleasant trade' rather than involvement with one's fellow soldiers but this far south it was seen as frivolous for an unmarried woman of her rank to dally with courtesans of any gender. Especially if there were lands in line to inherit, as was the case with her. The Rhenian princess had therefore been forced to be most careful in her dalliances, indulging only in the company of those who might never be a hazard to her position or reputation. The affairs had been rare, and after the first heart-wrenching time she'd had to part from a man she held deep affections for Cordelia had never again allowed them to linger.

Still, that did not mean she could not appreciate a well-formed calf or a muscled arm.

The First Prince's guards moved aside when they reached the threshold of the Vogue Archive, for access to what within was restricted by both ancient enchantments and much more recent wards. Cordelia parted with her escort with a courteous smile, pressing her palm against the heavy oaken door before her. Sorcery crackled against her skin, like a minuscule gust of wind, and the door opened without a sound as the old enchantment recognized her right to enter. The wards buzzed against her ears as she crossed the threshold, but the blonde Lycaonese paid it little mind: already her mind was on the sight awaiting her. This had been a great salon, once, where the Merovins had entertained others in the sort of amusements where none were expected to be wearing clothes by the end of the evening and the company of the beautiful was much encouraged.

The need for discretion – the people of Salia would have raised brows upon hearing of the diversions of their rulers – had seen enchantments laid on the doors leading into the room, restricting for whom they would open. That and the size of the salon had been the deciding factors in Cordelia ordering the beating heart of administration settled within, and there was no trace left to see of the original trivial purpose of the Vogue Archive. Great tables covered in sprawling maps of the different regions of the Pirnicpate as well as broader Calernia had been set down, each matched with bureaus seeing to the reports from such regions and foreign locales. The maps themselves were adorned with sculpted stones and silk ribbons representing trade arteries and supply lines, garrisons and crucial resources.

The Order of the Red Lion, whose mages swept in and out of the room regularly, kept reports and notes as fresh – *en vogue* – as was possible, resulting in a living and breathing map of the Principate of Procer that had allowed Cordelia and her councillors to avert enough crises over the previous two years that she could not remember when anyone had last argued to cut funding for the Archive. Trusted and thoroughly vetted scholars, traders and officials swarmed the great hall like ants in an anthill, filling scrolls of their own as they read through reports. Those scrolls headed to the very back of the hall, where on a raised dais the keen minds the First Prince had appointed as her foremost analysts had been granted desks of their own. Theirs was the task to sift through the mass of reports and identify the disasters that would plague Procer and the Grand Alliance before they came to pass, warning Cordelia so that they might be averted.

The Rhenian princess's entrance was met with a pause in the intricate dance of duties as bows and curtsies were offered, though when she returned them with a nod the sudden hush broke and activity resumed. Cordelia took the time to pass by some of the tables and speak, as she'd scheduled for, praising the Segovian bureau for the sea supply lines to Bremen they'd successfully forged and encouraging the Aisne bureau to redouble its efforts to find a way to keep that principality's granaries and treasury afloat after the ravages the Carrion Lord had inflicted there. Callowan grain would not be able to feed the heartland forever. The Levantine bureau approached her with an intercepted communication from the Holy Seljun of Levant trying to formalize diplomatic relations with the Kingdom of Callow through ambassadors as well as a list of the most likely individuals the Dominion might send should such an offer be accepted, which made for interesting reading.

She thanked the young woman who'd brought her the scroll and requested a more comprehensive report be made over the matter and sent to her. That would see to a third of the quarter-bell that Cordelia had allowed herself for reading this evening, by her own

estimation, which was an acceptable way to spend the time. The First Prince's feet took her up the low steps and onto the dais, where the three appointed analysts that were currently awake and serving were awaiting her. One was a distinguished merchant of low birth, Maria Fernanda of Treville, who'd turned the ailing fruit trading family business she'd inherited into one of the foremost trade societies of the south by virtue of being able to read trends in demand in time to capitalize on them. The second was Brother Alphonse of the Montresor monastery in Creusens, who Simon of Gorgeault had personally recommended as being the finest policy hound of the Holies prior to their fall.

The third and last in attendance was more complex a presence than a merchant and a priest: the Forgetful Librarian was undeniably a brilliant woman, but she was also Damned and largely unwilling to entertain the notion of someone having authority over her. That she'd been born to a family distant kin to the House of Brogloise ruling in Cantal had only encouraged what Cordelia suspected was an instinctive resentment of anyone who might have a claim on her hours, not to mention seen her wealthy enough a villain few had suspected her of even *being* one before the Archer had caught her in the middle of trying to steal manuscripts from Mercantis bought at auction and headed for the Belfry. A great many dead hired swords and several bruises later, the Forgetful Librarian had accepted the Truce and the Terms and been assigned to Salia by the Black Queen at Cordelia's own request. There were good reasons for that, though on some days it was necessary for the Rhenian princess to reminder herself of this more than once.

"Your Most Serene Highness," Brother Alphonse greeted her, hastily rising to his feet and bowing.

Maria Fernande mirrored him, but a heartbeat slower on the draw, but the Librarian had yet to raise her eyes from the book she'd been reading. Only when she turned the page did she look up, and sharply nodded.

"First Prince," the mousy-looking woman said. "Right on time. Shall we get to it?"

Cordelia ignored her, smiling and gesturing for the other two to return to their seats before taking her own.

"Librarian," she said, tone mild. "You have something to report?"

"You might say that, Your Highness," the Damned said, closing the book. "Maria read through the reports on trade through with the League and the Dominion, and I matched this with the records of tariffs between principalities south of Salia. The numbers I arrived at are worrying, when the substance of the Principate's debts is taken into consideration."

"And why is that?" Cordelia asked.

"We suspect," Maria Fernanda intervened, shooting a warning look at the Damned, "that the Principate had become fragile, Your Most Serene Highness."

Brother Alphonse cleared his throat.

"It is our conclusion that, unless regular trade routes are opened anew with League and Ashur," the priest delicately said, "Should Mercantis cease propping up the treasury Procer the entire Principate might come down like a house of cards."

A talk might be required, Cordelia faintly thought as the explanation continued, with the Black Queen.

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"Half past the hour would suit me better," Vivienne replied. "Though if it is a matter of great urgency, something might be arranged."

"We would not dare impose on your time in such a haphazard manner, Lady Dartwick," the tall woman facing her said. "I will relay your answer to Her Highness and see to it that your staff is kept informed of any and all developments."

Lady Vivienne Dartwick, heiress-designate to the Kingdom of Callow, watched with a bland expression as the First Prince's own chamberlain bowed and retired. She was not blind to the courtesy Hasenbach was extending by sending the very head of her household, Ingrid Backhaus, to arrange a meeting to 'drink tea'. Neither was she particularly moved by it, though. For the First Prince to be seeking out such an arrangement meant that the ruler of Procer needed to address something by informal channels of diplomacy – given that Vivienne did not yet have an idea of what was in need of addressing, she was inclined to chalk any courtesies up to the woman trying to butter her up before the talks. Cordelia Hasenbach wielded pleasantness and courtesy with an uncomfortable degree of effectiveness, Vivienne had found, so it was best to remain wary.

It was a delicate line to walk, between being Hasenbach's friend and her foe. Never to trust too deep or to give offence unprovoked, and though the dark-haired woman knew she was not half bad at these games she had not been *born* to them as the opposition so often was. Catherine could afford to ignore most of this, swagger in with a drink and quip and turn everybody's plans inside out, because she had the charm and the *raw power* for it. Vivienne had neither, so instead she tread as carefully as she had when she'd been the Thief and the evening air had smelled of ambush. She leaned back into her seat and let out a long breath, wondering if she should send for the Jacks now or later: whatever had moved Hasenbach to seek a meeting, it'd be best if she knew of it *before* that meeting.

"Let us resume, Henrietta," she finally said. "Word from the Observatory, you said?"

Henrietta Morley was heiress to the Barony of Harrow, Ainsley Morley's eldest daughter, and so the proper address would have been *Lady* Henrietta. They'd grown close enough to dispose with much of the formalities in private, however, as was only necessary if the heiress to Harrow was to remain as her secretary and advisor. That she was a thoroughly competent was only to be expected, given that Baroness Ainsley could not afford a weak successor given her rambunctious vassals, but even if she'd been a moonstruck fool Vivienne would still have found some place for her in her Salian 'court'. Ties to the baronies of the north, the last great landed nobles in Callow save for Duchess Kegan herself, were important in keeping the latter constrained.

Naming Henrietta her personal secretary had been a sign to the disposed nobles stripped of their lands by the Conquest and the Liesse Rebellion, too, that Vivienne was not as determined as Catherine to keep the highborn at a distance – after all, while Cat had used nobles and even appointed some to great offices she'd never kept any of them *close*. That'd been reserved for the Fifteenth, for the Woe, for those who'd borne steel in her name. But Vivienne saw these same man and women as a valuable resource: educated, often still wealthy by lowborn standards and often influential those nobles could be used instead of slowly ushered into oblivion. It'd be a waste to let them stay unused, where any rebellious hand might pick them up besides.

Besides, if the former thief was to be queen one day it wouldn't hurt to have a good relation with the future Baroness of Harrow.

"Fresh as of an hour ago," Henrietta agreed, tucking back her hair. "Lady Fadila has deemed the contents of the missive she passes on to be demanding of your immediate attention."

Vivienne's brow rose. Fadila Mbafeno was something of a liability, in her eyes – she'd once been a servant to Akua Sahelian, which as far as she was concerned was disqualification enough from holding office anywhere in Callow – but she'd remained as the informal head of the Observatory by virtue of being effectively impossible to replace and more than slightly competent. The dark-haired Callowan might not like the Soninke sorceress, but she did respect her judgement.

"Whose missive is it?" Vivienne asked.

"Our friend in the east," Henrietta delicately replied.

Ah, and there went her day. That meant Dread Empress Sepulchral, that ruthless old bat from Askum, who the heiress-designate to Callow trusted about as, well, a Dread Empress of Praes. Sepulchral was repugnant in nearly all regards, but too useful as

a check on Malicia to ignore. In appearance, at least. The 'civil war' in the Wasteland had been going on too long and too *oddly* for Vivienne to take the surface stirrings of it as face value anymore. That the former High Lady Abreha was foe to the Tower was beyond doubt, however, and regardless of all the rest that made her useful. Sepulchral had naturally gone out of her way to cultivate her usefulness to both the Grand Alliance at large and Callow in particular with typical Wasteland canniness. That often involved passing on information that neither the Jacks nor the Circle of Thorns would have gotten anywhere near otherwise.

"You've the transcribed message?" Vivienne asked.

"Translated from the cypher and ready for your perusal," Henrietta agreed.

The scroll she presented held a seal in dark blue wax, the Observatory's own. The wax was enchanted to turn to dust the moment the seal was broken, which made it clear whether the message had been spied upon on its way to the hands it was meant for.

"Thank you," she replied, taking the scroll.

The wax frittered into fine blue dust as she broke the seal, and she blew it off the edge of her desk before turning sharp eye to what had been written.

"Dire news, my lady?" Henrietta asked.

Vivienne grimaced.

"Our friend sends us a timely warning," she replied. "Malicia is about to bite our fingers off in Mercantis."

And wasn't that going to sting, a kick in the Grand Alliance's moneybags? Something needed to be done before the fingers felt the teeth closing in, and for that Vivienne required more than what she had at hand. Fortunately, last word had Catherine on her way to the Arsenal.

Vivienne was overdue a visit, she decided.

Interlude: Terms

"The doom of carefully laid plans is two unfeeling sisters by the names of mishap and surprise."

– King Pater of Callow, the Unheeding

"She'll be here in two days, we believe."

Masego thoughtfully peered down at the blade, insofar as it could truly be called that.

Though Helmgard had eventually been able to forge a sheath for it, an ornate affair of enameled steel, even that skilled heroine's finest work had not proved sufficient for full containment. The sheathed blade was being kept in a deep pool of ice cold water so that the power it constantly emanated would be dispersed, though to his practiced eyes it seemed like there would be need for more liquid: as matters stood, the surface of the pool subtly stirred as if touched by winds and the Hierophant believed that someone dipping a finger into the water was near certain to lose it. The aspect that Catherine had extracted of the Saint of Swords' corpse had been a temperamental thing even *before* seven Named and one had lent their hand to making a proper artefact of it. Masego was careful not to stand too close to the edge of the pool, for the edge of his robes would be no more immune to the power than flesh, and he frowned. Though the capacity of what had been forged here could not be denied, he suspected that he might well be scolded for the unfortunate impracticalities of certain aspects of it.

The odds were at least six in ten that anyone drawing the blade would die, after all.

"And you're not listening to me in the slightest, are you?" the Rogue Sorcerer sighed.

"Perhaps if we made a suit of armour," Masego considered. "That allows one to withstand using it."

Though in principle he supposed use would be 'withstood', if at the likely loss of limb and or head. It was all a matter of defining the acceptable boundaries of loss. It would take significant time and effort to create such a suit of armour, however, and a wielder for the blade would have to be decided upon first. Such matter, to his admittedly half-hearted understanding of the politics involved, might become somewhat contentious.

"You could at least deny it," the Rogue Sorcerer complained.

What were they talking about again? Hierophant vaguely remember talk about hearings, and beliefs. A trial of some sort, he decided.

"I agree," Masego said, which usually got him out of these situations.

A heartbeat passed.

"Yet we should discuss it in greater detail with the others," he cunningly added.

It would not do to accidentally approve of another bout of foolishness like a wine cellar being added to the Workshop, even

if acceding to that request had ended up making the Hunted Magician unusually agreeable for a few weeks. Either that or drunk, Masego could sometimes find it hard to tell.

"You only ever say that when you haven't been listening, Masego," Roland said. "It's the single most transparent evasion in an arsenal made of particularly thin air."

Hierophant's brow furrowed. He'd been seen through, then. Fortunately, Indrani had taught him how to escape this sort of situations flawlessly. Pushing down his general dislike of physical contact with anyone but a few, he laid a hand on Roland's shoulder and put on a sympathetic expression.

"I am flattered by your interest," he said, "but I do not reciprocate the attraction."

Roland looked down at the hand, then back up at him. It would probably take a few heartbeats to work, Masego mused. Referring even obliquely to sex made people skittish, which made sense as it seemed like a lot of trouble for middling returns. It wasn't like children couldn't be made with the proper alchemies, either, though admittedly the lack of soul might be off-putting to some.

"It is important to me, my friend," the Rogue Sorcerer slowly said, "that you understand the Archer is not an appropriate person to take cues from."

Masego's brow rose, loosening the silken blindfold before this glass eyes.

"In what context?" he asked.

"In *any* context," Roland feelingly said.

That sounded rather dubious but then, for all his intelligence and learning, the man *was* a hero. And Proceran as well, which some of the bolder treatises about bloodlines from the ninth century considered to be a birth defect. Masego withdrew his hand, having left it there quite long enough.

"As you no doubt already knew," Roland said, tone rather pointed for some reason, "Queen Catherine has reached out to one of the boundary stations and informed the garrison that she will be arriving within two days."

It would take the better part of a day to get to the Arsenal proper from any boundary station as well, Masego knew. He'd never known the translocation to happen in less than six hours, and it had to be initiated at the proper time besides.

"It will be good to see her," Hierophant agreed.

"It will," Roland sighed, then muttered under his breath about herding cats.

That was a notoriously difficult activity, Masego knew, which meant the other scholar had likely reached a dead end in one of his research ventures. Hierophant could sympathize, given that proving his Quartered Seasons theory had become increasingly difficult. If there was truly a fourth realm of power out there, or even the husk of one, it was resisting his best efforts to locate and measure it. Yet Catherine's return, he thought with a brightened mood, would – as if often did – open up the option of using overwhelming brute force against a complex problem.

"Is this why Tomas and Helmgard have been holed up in their private workshops for two days?" he suddenly frowned. "Catherine wouldn't insist on running them ragged to finish the last touches on the Mirage, she's always found the Observatory quite sufficient for all her needs."

Masego allowed himself a degree of pride over that last truth, for he'd known granting his request to built in those first months after her coronation had been an extension of trust on her part. It was deeply pleasant to know he'd not failed that trust. Besides, while she knew neither the Blind Maker nor the Bitter Blacksmith he doubted Catherine would want them to face consecutive sleepless nights on her behalf.

"It's not for her personal use, it's for a full council session of the Grand Alliance's highest officers," Roland said, as if he ought to already know this. "Twilight's Pass sent the Kingfisher Prince to speak in its name, but neither Princes Rozala nor the Iron Prince will be able to make the journey. That means the Mirage will have to be fully functional or we'll be relying on constant scrying-chains."

Hierophant idly wondered if he should start paying more attention at the daily evening briefings of the Belfry. Maybe, since he'd had no notion of any of this. Would he? Probably not.

"The Order cadres in Salia would prove sufficient for the task, when it comes to Vivienne and the First Prince," Masego said.

It was a little unseemly, resorting to such slick wiles to ascertain if either of these would be coming. Yet to do otherwise would shatter the illusion he'd been maintaining that he devoted his full attentions to any part of those meetings that was not about funding or the attribution of staff.

"It won't be necessary, with both of them here in person," Roland replied. "Mind you, there might be as much as a week between Queen Catherine and the arrival of the rest of them so we're not out of time quite yet."

"It would be best to be ready ahead of time in case of any surprises, though," Masego caught on. "That is reasonable. I'll take a look at the complex myself."

"That would be appreciated," Roland said, inclining his head.

Hierophant briskly nodded but cast a lingering look at the sheathed sword within the waters. When the other Named moved he willed one of the glass orbs within his skull to pivot and watch him, noting the short-sleeved cloth shirt and simple trousers the other man wore. Tinkering clothes, the kind that would not get caught on things and would not be a significant monetary loss were they irreparably damaged. The shorter Named strode up the five steps to the edge of the pool, only there ending his advance. Out of politeness Masego kept an eye on him, even if he did not turn his head.

"We still haven't agreed on a name for her, have we?" the Rogue Sorcerer mused.

"It is not a sentient artefact, it cannot have a gender," Hierophant noted. "And I remain in favour of *Severance*."

"*Severity* has the better ring to it, as far as I'm concerned," Roland replied.

"It hardly matters," Masego said, "unless one adheres to that Pelagian nonsense about term resonance."

Though Procer's sorcery was largely of the unfortunate Jaquinite mold, there were several enclaves in the Arlesite territories where older methods were at work. The Pelagian theory of magic was a child's mimicry of what the Gigantes could do with Ligurian methods, liberally seasoned with ignorant mysticism and rites more religious than magical. Pelagia herself had been famous in her time for her splendid enchantments, and some of that talent still remained in those who claimed to be the inheritors of her ways, but the few shards of truth to be found there buried in a sea of drivel.

"I do believe in it," Roland reminded him.

Ah. He'd quite forgot that, admittedly.

"Naming something cannot stabilize its 'nature', which is a rather dubious concept in any case," Masego bluntly said. "There has been no dependable evidence of this being the case."

"When it comes to most things, I would agree," the Rogue Sorcerer said, then he flicked a glance at the blade in the water.

Ever-roiling, as if waiting for the hand that would wield it.

"But there are bodies in Creation that obey different rules as the rest," he said. "How can I not believe that, having seen it with my own eyes?"

"We are all ignorant children trying to piece together the truths of titans," Masego said, "but the moment, Roland, that was we are *satisfied* with an explanation we are lost. Observation is not understanding, and is there anything as hateful as willfully lingering in your own ignorance?"

The other man's lips quirked.

"You've a surprisingly poetic bent, on occasion," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "But in the end, my friend, you are a scholar of the Gift while I remain a mere practitioner. If I only ever used what I understand, I would use nothing at all."

"You are deepening your faults beyond the reasonable," Hierophant informed him. "Though on occasion you act more like a collector than a mage, you've also used sorcery from every extant theory of magic without going stark-raving mad."

That was, as far as Masego knew, largely unprecedented. At best one of the Gifted would borrow insights from other approaches to sorcery, as delving deep into another after already being taught tended to learn to severe mental sicknesses as well as deeper spiritual weaknesses. In this matter Hierophant suspected that it was one of the Rogue Sorcerer's own aspects that shielded him from the backlash inherent in genuinely believing often fundamentally opposing facts about magic, the same that allowed him to flawlessly wield any sort of magical artefact he touched: *Use*, simply termed for how frightfully deep the waters of it ran.

"Collector's accurate enough," Roland quietly said. "Though I like to believe myself a principled specimen of the breed."

The man was in an odd mood, one Masego found it hard to decipher, so he decided to press forward.

"Would you accompany me to the Mirage?" Hierophant asked. "If I find defects in the work, I'll have to seek you out regardless."

"If that is agreeable," Roland replied. "Shall we?"

Masego nodded. A few steps took them away from the pool where the blade that once been an aspect lay sheathed and seething, and the pulsing runes carved into the otherwise bare stone walls shone brighter as the pair of them left the room before winking out. Behind them, enchanted doors barred themselves shut and they continued across the granite walkway leading them further from the cube they'd been inside of. The holy water within, regularly blessed by priests, swept over the walkway the moment their feet reached the other side: the wretched Blessed Artificer, though

utterly unpleasant in most regards, had been somewhat helpful in providing mechanisms that would allow the walkway to rise and lower without relying on sorcery the blessed water might disrupt. The precautions were, in the end, warranted: that blade was, so far, the closest to a weapon capable of destroying the Dead King the Arsenal had come to making.

Another set of enchanted doors closed behind them as the pair entered the Depository proper, which Masego tended to think of as an overly grandiose name for what was in effect a glorified warehouse. There were parts of it more protected and restricted than others, the one they were leaving most of all, but the least secure parts were typically large rooms full of crates awaiting shipping out and not some mysterious maze of wonders. The nature of the men and women the two Named encountered after passing another three protective chokepoints reflected this. There were few of the scholars in red, white or bronze – Gifted, priests, academics – that were everywhere in the branches of the Belfry. Instead it was armed guards, handpicked from the different hosts of the Grand Alliance in equal numbers, and workers that they came across. Most bowed, though unlike scholars they tended to aim the courtesy more towards Roland than himself.

Masego asked of his companion's latest venture, a runic seal meant to be able to impress that same rune into cloth or wood and have it magically functional, as they walked and found himself engrossed in the pleasant conversation as they made their way out of the Depository, through the curling hallways of the Knot and through that oft-messy and crowded crossroads up warded stairs and into the silent hush of the Chancel. There only a few were allowed entry, and the wards guarding the sanctum had been of his own design. Though the Chancel was the smallest section of the Arsenal, it held within its walls several matters of variable importance: the central warding array, the restricted stacks and the offices of the Arsenal treasury. It also held the reason the two Name had come: the great enchanted room called the Mirage, which Masego suspected might just be the first example of the sorcery that would come to replace scrying.

The lower level belonged to the treasury and the restricted stacks, the latter of which being warded and guarded, but the Mirage and the central warding array were further above and even more heavily restricted. At least the Mirage was not the furthest level up, where the array awaited: the guards here, heavily armed and armoured as they were, were not allowed beyond the first checkpoint. The second gate would open only for a drop of the proper blood, fresh from the body, and would fill the hallway with hellflame should it not be provided quickly enough. The last and seemingly third gate was kept closed unless one of a limited set of keys was used, though depending on *which* was another action was required beyond it – else a mounting accumulation of power in a hidden enchantment would grow to trigger an alarm

ward. The Mirage *was* meant to be used, however, and restricting access too much would be inconvenient.

A series of comprehensive checks and another set of wards were all the two Named had to wait through before entering, though the guard captain supervising notified them there were already people within.

"Scholars?" Roland asked, brow rising.

"Chosen, Lord Sorcerer," the soldier replied. "And one of the Damned as well."

Masego strode past the two of them, mildly curious but rather more interested in inspecting the latest refinements of the Mirage. The room itself was not so large, a circle of a mere two hundred feet in diameter, but it had still taken a colossal amount of work to ensure that not so much as speck of the floor, walls and ceiling would offer magical interference with the delicate sorceries meant to be worked within. For that reason the great round table at the heart had been made of stone as well, as materials that had previously been alive had been judged risky, though the parts worthy of admiration were not these. Around the table, exactly twenty armchairs of stone had been placed within boxes of glass just slightly apart from each other. Linked to the scrying pool hidden beneath the table, ropes of a dozen different purified metals – including grey adamant, which only the Gigantes knew how to make – connected to different parts of the ritual arrays hidden under the floor of the seats, connected to the glass of the boxes through a superbly clever bridging enchantment of the Repentant Magister's invention.

The result was a nearly perfect illusion carried by the glass: with the proper preparations made on both sides, anyone seated at the table of the Mirage would be within an illusion perfectly mimicking the immediate surroundings and individual of whoever was being scryed by the central ritual. When Catherine would claim her seat here, she'd be able to converse with the likes of Rozala Malanza and the Iron Prince as if they were all truly in the same room. The difficult part had been creating the portable kits that'd allow the illusion to carry from the *other* side, and there imprecisions remained in need of fixing. But an elementary kit for connection had already been provided to all three fronts, and at this point the burden of work was largely on the Arsenal's side: it was the room here that needed to be flawless so that everything would function. Which was why Masego's lips thinned when he saw that one of the glass boxes had been opened, the seat within removed and the tile of stone covering the hidden arrays taken out.

Of the three people already in the room, two were kneeling and digging into the entrails of the array while the last was on his feet and looking down with apparent indifference. The Hunted

Magician, as the only one not occupied, was the first to notice Hierophant's entrance. The dark-haired man in ornate court dress took a bow.

"Lord Hierophant," the Magician said. "An unexpected pleasure."

The sound of boots scuffing stone informed Masego that Roland had caught up, and the Rogue Sorcerer answered before he bothered to.

"Magician," Roland said. "Shouldn't you be working on a replacement wardstone for the Army of Callow?"

The distaste between those two had been instant and instantly shared, which Hierophant found a waste given that they were the two finest Proceran practitioners he'd met.

"Have my hours suddenly become accountable to the likes of you, Sorcerer?" the Magician nonchalantly replied.

"A pleasure to see you as well, Lord Magician," Masego finally replied.

If he was lucky, his intervention might even end the bickering before it truly began.

"Roland, kindly abstain," one of the kneeling pair called out. "I was the one who requested his assistance."

The Repentant Magister rose to her feet after speaking, smoothing down her robes.

"Assistance with what?" Masego asked.

"Worry has been expressed that the Black Queen's mere strength in the Night might serve as a disruption of the Mirage," the Hunted Magician said. "And so there was a need to get at the lower arrays for testing."

The Proceran villain had been the one to design the enchantment that kept the stone tiles in place, so both his presence and the way he'd merely been waiting around when Masego entered were explained in a single stroke. Yet a question was begged by what he'd been told.

"And when it comes to matters of Night," Hierophant said, turning his head towards the Magister, "you did not come to consult me?"

"She didn't need to," the last person in the room said, rising to her feet.

The Blessed Artificer smiled tightly in his direction. Her dark skin and golden eyes, the signature of Wasteland highborn of the oldest and most powerful lines, were always jarring to behold when paired with the truth of what she was: a priest with a

blacksmith's hammer, an ignorant meddler of the worst sort. Masego was not Roland, to let his irrationally strong dislike of the other Named affect his judgement, but neither would he deny that something in him always itched to *crush her work utterly* whenever he caught sight of it. It was quite distressingly visceral a reaction.

"After all, she already had an expert on hand," the Blessed Artificer said.

"You have never even encountered Night," Masego replied in clipped tones. "And you hardly have the proper academic frame to even begin to conceive of it."

"You're a Praesi miscarriage of a person," the Artificer smiled. "You've no proper frame to conceive of anything at all."

Her hand slipped into her tunic, fingers closing around some half-seen device, Light bloomed and then Masego saw nothing at all. Not that he'd fallen into unconsciousness, but rather that some sort of device was interfering with the sight of his eyes. How deeply unpleasant of her.

"*Adanna*," the Rogue Sorcerer reproached.

Witness, Masego thought, and his Name sang. His eyes burned behind the blindfold, with Summer flame and something entirely his own, and in the Artificer's grasp he found the whirling device of steel and Light she'd used to blind him.

"**Wrest**," the Hierophant coldly said, raising a hand.

The Light ripped out of the device, uncontested for the lack of will behind it, and it formed into a ball above the palm of his hand. He closed his fingers into a fist. When he opened his palm again, it was to reveal dispersing wisps of Light.

"You broke my device," the Blessed Artificer harshly said.

"Be thankful it was not your spine," the Hierophant replied, just as harshly.

Both eyes on the heroine, he did not catch sight of the sculpture until it bounced off the side of his head with a perfect bopping sound.

—

On most days, Indrani was all for the amount of pretty people in this room getting all red-cheeked and flustered but sadly this looked a lot more likely to end up in the Eleventh Crusade than clothes hitting the floor. Something had to be done, so Archer turned to a method that had never failed her: throwing things at people until they did what she wanted. The wooden sculpture she'd

been working on over the last wander just because it made Alder and Aspasie embarrassed bounced off Zeze's head magnificently, catching the eye of all five other Named in their secret hush-hush magic room.

"Is that a naked woman?" the Repentant Magister asked, cocking her head to the side.

"Is that Catherine?" Masego asked, sounding rather curious.

Bless his soul, Indrani fondly thought, he no longer even bothered to comment on her tossing things at him.

"You've seen the Black Queen naked?" Roland asked, sounding shocked.

Indrani swaggered up to her paramour, throwing an arm around his shoulder so he'd be too distracted to mention it was the faint scar carved across the belly and not the nice ass that'd revealed the identity of the woman she'd been carving.

"He's been in her quite a bit, Ro-ro," Indrani told the Rogue Sorcerer, wagging her eyebrows.

"Quite regularly, during the Tenth Crusade," Masego agreed absent-mindedly, which was just perfect.

The Repentant Magister – Nephele, wasn't it? – cast a look at her carving that bore curiosity of more than merely academic nature, so Indrani almost patted herself on the back for being such a good friend. The Stygian heroine was quite the beauty, with those curls and curves, so one might even argue she was being a very good friend. Indrani's intentions to keep stirring the pot for entertainment and also the sake of peace, she supposed, were neatly waylaid by utter surprise when Masego turned and put a hand on her shoulder. He stood almost a head taller than she, Indrani froze when he leaned down and pressed a soft kiss on her right cheek and then the left. His lips were soft. He smelled of ink and cool stone.

She was *not* blushing.

"Welcome back, Indrani," Masego warmly said.

"Er, yes," she said. "Lovely to welcome you too. Back. You know what I mean."

"Not particularly," Masego cheerfully admitted.

He extricated himself from their embrace and she let him – she'd known from the start it would be best to let him set the boundaries of their involvement, when it came to physicality – only after they'd separated tugging down her tunic.

"You can keep the sculpture," Archer told the Magister, winking. "You know, for comparison purposes."

The Stygian reddened, speaking a denial in tradertalk that shouldn't fool anyone with any sense.

"What a delight to have you among us once more, Lady Archer," the Hunted Magician smiled at her.

Ah, yet another pretty one. That one was all about the chase, though, as Alamans tended to be – the way he was simultaneously pursuing the Bitter Blacksmith and the Blessed Artificer spoke to that. Both of them looked they wanted to cave in his head, on most occasion Indrani had seen, but also there seemed to be a lot of feeling reluctantly flattered. Right on time, the Blessed Artificer shot the man an unimpressed sideways look.

"Same, Mags," she drawled. "Brought in a new girl for you lot, so put on your fairday best."

"I would not dare to disappoint, Lady Archer," he drily replied.

"New girl, you said. A mage?" Roland asked.

He looked all hopeful now, which made it all the more a pleasure to crush his happiness. In her defence, Archer wouldn't have kept picking on the man if it wasn't so *fun*.

"She's called the Red Axe," Indrani grinned. "And she screws with magic just by being around it."

"That would be interesting to study," Zeze agreed, blind to the disappointed look on Roland's face.

"Brought in the rest of my band too," Archer idly mentioned. "Rest and recovery, until we head out again. Magister, you know the Vagrant Spear right?"

"We fought together in Cleves," the heroine agreed. "Though I would not consider us closely acquainted."

The way Indrani had heard it Nephele had been pretty much a twat up there in Cleves, before she got her shit together, so she wasn't surprised to hear it. Then again, Cat did like the catty ones so it checked out.

"You'll be staying for some time, then?" Masego asked her.

"At least a week," Archer shrugged. "Why?"

"Catherine will be arriving in two days," he told her. "I'll have your affairs moved to my quarters."

Indrani suppressed a smile. It was pleasant to sleep in the same bed, and even more so when he seemed to enjoy that intimacy as well.

"You could buy me a drink first, at least," she said, fanning herself.

"A wine cellar has been added to the Workshop, so that shouldn't be necessary," Masego revealed.

Indrani flicked a look at the Hunted Magician, whose lips twitched, and she bestowed upon the man a nod of solemn approval. It was heartening to see at least one of these people had their priorities straight.

"That'll be fun to break into," Indrani mused, the eyes the calmed situation in the room and decided that if she left all the ingredients here the brew was likely to start boiling again. "Come with me to have a look at the Red Axe, would you? I want to know if the poor girl will be locked into a room for the rest of this or if she can wander around some."

To her appreciative surprise, Masego not only agreed but offered her his arm. Considering she'd made it clear that he shouldn't offer physical contact unless he wanted it, a lesser woman might have been chuffed by how unhesitatingly he extended the unspoken offer. Not Indrani of course, unless you squinted a lot in the right light. She threaded her arm through hers and offered the rest of the Named a nonchalant wave, allowing herself to be escorted back out.

"So, is it me or do you have even more Named kicked around than before?" she asked as they began their way down the stairs.

"It isn't you," Masego replied. "The First Prince got her hands on the Forgetful Librarian, but we've added two since your last visit: the Blind Maker and the Doddering Sage."

"Heroes?" Indrani idly asked.

"We are not certain for the Sage," he admitted. "His moments of clarity are rare, if incredibly useful. We've also a guest in the person of the Wicked Enchanter, though he'll not be staying. He's more a hedge mage than a true practitioner, even if he has mastered some lesser arts, so his value outside the field is limited."

"Anything fun?" Archer said, mildly curious.

"Mind control, though rather imperfect," Zeze replied. "Some elemental conjuring as well, but his arsenal is essentially varied methods of domination."

Indrani's steps stuttered.

"The Wicked Enchanter," she slowly said. "Where did he come from?"

"Valencis originally," Masego said, "though he spent some years in Helike and lately in –"

"- Orense," Indrani finished. "He was in Orense, where he slew and robbed and raped his fill in the villages around the outskirts of the Brocelian."

"You have heard of him before," Masego realized.

"I just spent two months travelling with the heroine he made," she grimly replied. "So we best hurry and keep them apart, or there'll be blood on the floor."

They were too late.

Archer realized, with a sinking feeling, that she might just have helped make a very large mess.

Chapter 13: Ingress

"One must not look down on tricks that deceive only fools, my son, as the better part of the people of the world are patently foolish."

– Extract from the infamous 'Sensible Testament' of Basilea Chrysanthé of Nicae

It'd once been a delicate balance, keeping Zombie walking at a pace that Hakram could easily match, not anymore. She'd grown used to it and was quite capable of understanding without me pulling on the reins that I wanted to keep pace with my towering second-in-command. Sometimes I wondered exactly how intelligent the undead horse was, or even if she was truly still that at all. The necromancy I'd used when Sovereign of Moonless Nights had been... off. The dead Akua had raised in my place at the Battle of the Camps had famously ignored holy water, and I'd noticed myself that the longer they remained raised the more intelligent they seemed to become. That was not, I'd been told, something typically associated with necromantic sorcery. It was with the summoning arts, though, and some days I could not help but wonder whether I was riding a corpse or a bound spirit. I stroked the mare's mane softly, and she neighed softly in approval.

"The White Knight is five days behind," Hakram said, breaking me out of my thoughts. "He found it difficult to arrange for a trustworthy replacement in seeking fresh Named."

Trustworthy was unlikely to be the problem with Hanno arranging for someone to stand in his place. Even the worst pricks on his side of the fence tended to be at least well-meaning. I'd guess that the trouble had been finding someone who wouldn't pull a blade on a fresh villain or talk in a way that got a blade pulled on *them* instead. Heroes with a diplomatic bent didn't grow on trees, though if I ever caught so much as whiff of such a thing growing anywhere I'd been sending a band of five after it faster than you could say 'oh Gods please, just please'.

"Do we know who he picked?" I asked.

"The Silver Huntress," Hakram gravelled.

Approvingly, I noted. I was more ambivalent over that particular heroine, as though she was undeniably competent in all manners of ways she also fought like cats and dogs with Indrani whenever they got even remotely near each other. Archer had, to no one's surprise, regularly 'sparred' with the heroine back when they'd both been pupils of the Lady of the Lake. The Huntress was eager at the notion of settling that old debt, and very sensitive to the perception that she might be getting forced back over anything by her old bully. Between that and the two of them being Named with a preference for bows, there were quite enough grounds there for seething hostility to be the name of the game.

"She'll get it done," I evenly replied.

And on that we set the matter aside, both of us having noticed the approach of the outriders headed our way. The fortress where we were headed went by the name of Saregnac, though fortress was something of a misnomer: it'd been as much a jail as a castle, which a less diplomatic woman might have said meant it'd been a pretty shitty castle. Gods, look at that curtail wall: the bastard thing wasn't even crenellated, it was like they were just *asking* to be stormed.

"It's all over your face," Hakram said.

"I could take this place with five goblins and a scarecrow," I muttered back. "I've seen the costs to the treasury, they could have at least sprung for a place with a proper moat."

"How good of a scarecrow are we talking?" Adjutant asked, sounding interested.

I flicked another glance at those walls: barely twenty feet tall, and I'd seen thicker ogres.

"Below average," I decided.

"I could do with three, it it's a really good scarecrow," Hakram said, the fangs he allowed to peek slightly through his lips implying mocking challenge.

"Please," I snorted, "any idiot could do it with that good a scarecrow. Just dress it up like Black and bait them into a field full of munitions. Scarecrow quality is the crux of the difficulty here."

The outriders from Saregnac reached the vanguard of our little caravan, though in truth our entire group was ahead of the slower-moving wagons as unlike those we could cut through the countryside without risking wheels coming off. The line of legionaries ahead of us spoke with the Procerans and shortly after a lieutenant peeled off from the rest to pass along the message. Saregnac, he told us, was ready for our arrival and the Arsenal had been told of our coming. We were lucky, as it happened, as one of the functional times for translocation was one hour before Noon Bell and we were nearing it. The wagons would have to stay behind and wait until one past Afternoon Bell, but if our little group picked up the pace we'd get there with time to spare.

"Send a messenger back to Captain Forfeit," I ordered Adjutant. "We'll be going on ahead."

The Soninke would approve of resting the horse teams for the wagons beneath the shade of Saregnac's walls, I suspected, however unimpressive the walls in question. She'd probably enjoy a halfway decent meal and cold water as well, I mused, the spring days were much warmer in southern Brabant. Even as a messenger peeled off, the rest of us returned to the journey. It wasn't long before we were back on the Proceran country roads – which, though it pained me to admit it, were better than anything in Callow save for the royal roads and what little highway we'd inherited from the Miezens – which I was coming to suspect were the reason Saregnac had been chosen as a boundary station for the Arsenal. The defences might not be anything to praise, but the place did seem eminently accessible. That was almost as useful, though in all honesty I would have preferred the northernmost of the Arsenal entrances to be a stronger holdfast.

The gatehouse was respectable, at least, with a drawbridge over a shallow dry moat leading to a well-maintained portcullis that was already up when we arrived. The commander of the forces holding Saregnac came out to meet me personally. Some middle-aged cousin of Prince Etienne of Brabant, which was the unfortunately not an unexpected amount of nepotism when it came to Proceran soldiery. They weren't usually *stupid* about raising up kin, though, so there ought to be – ah, and there was the man actually in charged. A former *fantassin*, by the looks of the garishly dyed red and yellow hair, but he'd clearly not gotten the scar under his eye in garrison duty. I requested the man in question –

Lucien of Pitrerin, as it turned out – to be my escort, pawning off the royal relative to Hakram, and was rewarded by a blunt assessment of the situation as we were escorted deeper into Saregnac by impressively well-drilled soldiers.

"We can't hold the walls if we're seriously tested, Your Majesty," the man agreed without hesitation. "I wouldn't even try. The place was a prison for nobles, so it was never meant to withstand a proper storm."

"I don't mean to impugn your efforts here," I said. "But that's not the answer I was looking for, Master Lucien."

"We have truly defensible grounds, Your Majesty, they're simply not the walls," the man told me. "The barbican deeper in is what the place was built around, and it's from the early days of the Principate. That I could hold against an army for days, and the room where the magic circle is was dug beneath into bedrock."

That was good to hear, I thought, though I still had concerns. While losing one of the boundary stations to the Dead King wouldn't necessarily mean losing the Arsenal – there were further precautions – it'd be a hard blow. While it'd be a waste to send a Named to stand guard here, there were things that could be done without resorting to that.

"I'll see if I can't shake loose a company of sappers and send it your way," I replied. "Not permanently, but at least long enough to turn those outer defences into something it doesn't wound me to think about."

"My most humble thanks, Your Majesty," Lucien of Pitrerin said, sounding genuinely thankful.

I waved a hand, somewhat embarrassed.

"We're all in the same boat, soldier," I said. "Gods forbid it capsize."

"I hear *that*," the man muttered back.

By the time we reached the barbican the soldier had told me about – which was a solid little bastion, I'd admit to that, though hiding the arrowslits under gargoyles was good as, practically speaking, not hiding them at all – Hakram was back in the fold, his royal lamprey in tow. I almost had to admire the dedication to social climbing of a Proceran willing to fawn over an orc. It was oddly inspiring to see petty ambition triumphing over bigotry, kind of like if I'd seen an imp knife a Beast of Hierarchy. The nearing turn of the hour served as sufficient excuse to escape an invitation to a meal with the man, and reluctantly we were led into the barbican and then through a broad downwards tunnel into bedrock. A few wards and fortified

doors later, we stood in an otherwise bare ritual room large enough to accommodate maybe a hundred people at a time. Rituals arrays, a dizzying tapestry of circles and squares and interlocked arcane shapes that would give me a migraine if I looked at them too long, had been craved directly into the floor.

The mages stationed here were mostly Procerans, though there were two of twenty that were on loan from the Army of Callow. I was attended to by them – Callowans both, I learned, fresh to the service but both taught personally by Masego at the Arsenal – as my escort and I were herded into the proper locations and finally asked to avoid leaving the circles we were standing in. Some larger shapes, probably meant for wagons and the like, remained empty. The ritual itself was not long, half an hour of incantations in sequence as the arrays were methodically powered, and then with a shiver we were all standing within an almost identical stone room without the mages who'd sent us here. The air here had that particular taste to it I knew well: Twilight's subtle sweetness, or perhaps freshness. Arrowslits in the walls around us were the first indication that any intruders would find this a well-prepared killing ground, though when red-robed mages from the Arsenal entered the room to invite us to follow them I was quick to see that was only the beginning of it.

The corridor beyond had been built with seemingly two things in mind: for supply wagons to be able to pass through and the ability to wage a stubborn defence against anyone entering through the array room. Spike-bearing steel bars could be brought down to anchor makeshift palisades, portcullises were set in the ceiling every thirty feet and I even caught sight of runes and ritual arrays carved into the walls, awaiting someone to wield them. Soldiers in red, the Arsenal's own garrison drawn from every army of the Grand Alliance, watched in silence as we passed through ward after ward. This place, I thought with approval, would be a bloody grinder if the Dead King ever reached it. Which he shouldn't be able to, as it'd begun as a simple cavern within a mountain in the Twilight Ways before being expanded into this: no full route to the surface had ever been opened. At the other end of the corridor, we reached another ritual room that would take us to the last stopover before we reached the Arsenal proper.

To my surprise, though, it was not only red-robes mages awaiting us in there: pushing himself off the wall he'd been leaning against as he waited, Roland de Beaumarais – also known as the Rogue Sorcerer – stood up at my approach. His inevitable long leather coat swirling behind him, he made to bow until I caught his arm and pulled him into an embrace instead.

"Roland," I smiled, "Weeping Heavens, it's good to see you."

He looked about to say something, his still-tanned face beginning a frown, but instead he returned my smile in kind.

"And you as well, Catherine," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "It's been too long."

Over a year now: he'd not set foot outside the Arsenal since its construction that I knew of, at least not on Creation. The half-realms allowing entry to our little house of wonders didn't count. Hakram stepped up and the two of them clasped arms, the orc towering over the human.

"Rogue," Adjutant gravelled. "Always a pleasure."

"Deadhand," Roland replied with quirking lips. "Glad to see the Stained Sister didn't leave you with a limp."

I was a little sad Indrani wasn't there to hear that, since she would have been able to make something damned filthy out of that.

"Is something wrong?" I asked. "I'm always glad to see you, but I'd not expected to run into any of you until we reached the Threshold."

Which was on the other side of that complicated array in front of us, as it happened.

"There's been some trouble," Roland grimaced. "I judged it necessary to give you advance warning."

My brow rose.

"Not Keter," I slowly said.

We'd be having a rather more urgent conversation were that the case. It wasn't that I believed it to be impossible for the Dead King to reach this place – I couldn't think of a way out of hand, given that we were using the Twilight Ways as way to keep his creatures out, but that hardly meant there wasn't actually one – but rather that if he did get to the Arsenal, it would be for a killing stroke. I couldn't see Neshamah revealing his hand over anything less than a good chance of outright destroying the place: a raid would just lead us to tighten the defences, after the frankly ridiculous amount of Named within the halls drove it back.

"There has been killing," the hero told me, sounding like someone trying very hard to avoid saying the word murder.

If there'd been blood spilled by the mundane staff of the Arsenal, I thought, he wouldn't be standing in front of me offering advance warning. It would not be my place to address a knife fight between guards or a scholarly rivalry gone red. Which

meant this wasn't about the killing so much as *who* had done the killing.

"Who?"

"A villain by the Name of the Wicked Enchanter was slain," Roland told me, pitching his voice low.

"And one of you lot did the slaying," I deduced.

My fingers clenched, though I would not hasten to judgement. I'd given a bleeding boy surrounded by the corpses he'd made the benefit of the doubt, and it was not a principle if it only applied to people you felt for.

"The Red Axe," he tacitly agreed. "I will not argue for breach of the Terms, Catherine, but there were... extenuating circumstances."

"The Enchanter has – had – a certain reputation," Hakram told me. "Though he was also considered a promising lead in usurping control of lesser dead from Keter."

"I hope they're damned good circumstances, Roland," I bluntly said. "Otherwise this ends with gallows and a noose."

I leaned a little closer.

"This is known?" I softly asked. "It was seen?"

"It was done as our people were heading out for midday meal, an openly fought battle," Roland murmured back.

Shit. Whatever happened now, there would be no keeping that from spreading. The Arsenal might be isolated from Creation and we read the letters going in and out, but given the amount of people that lived within its walls there would be no way a Named fight would stay secret forever.

"How many Named are there in the Arsenal right now?" Hakram asked.

Good, I'd been wondering that myself.

"Archer arrived two days past with her full band and the Red Axe," the Rogue Sorcerer replied. "Which brings us at sixteen – eighteen including you and Adjutant, Catherine."

In other words, I was about to walk into a warehouse full of goblin munitions after someone had tossed a torch into it. *Fuck.* Better it be me than anyone else I could think of, and even better that Hanno was on his way, but still. In the immortal words of Queen Catherine Foundling, first of her name: *fuck.* And there were more of us coming, too. The White Knight for one, but the Painted Knife and her own band were headed our way at a brisk

pace. I genuinely could not remember reading of such a large amount of Named in the same place at the same time, at least not outside a crusading army marching on Keter itself.

"Tell me it didn't get out of control after that," I demanded.

He hesitated.

"Tell me no one else died after that," I said, haggling with disaster.

"Accusations were thrown that the Chosen were attempting a purge, and Archer had to pull the Vagrant Spear off of the Hunted Magician. Bruises and a cut, but nothing lasting."

I repressed the urge to swear under my breath, knowing my soldiers were close enough they'd be able to hear. The Vagrant Spear was one of Indrani's crew, so I wasn't worried there, but all my reports about the Arsenal mentioned the Hunted Magician as being fairly influential among the villains there. Masego could have edged him out of the unofficial leadership fairly easily, as either more or equally powerful as well as *significantly* better-connected, but Masego would have no interest in playing court games as long as the Magician let him have his way on the things that actually mattered to him. And if he'd been good enough to survive as a Procer mage villain while the Saint and the Pilgrim were still kicking around, then it was safe to assume he was at least that smart. *Fuck*, I thought once more. Why was it that, of the two Proceran spellcasters with social skills, it was the one supposedly on my side that was most likely to become a headache?

This had the making of a pivot, and not one I liked the looks of.

"Get me there, Roland," I said. "Before the fucking Eleventh Crusade starts in our backyard."

"Your Majesty," the Rogue Sorcerer replied, inclining his head.

He was one of the few heroes that'd never actually sounded at least a little mocking coming from, yet another reason I'd seriously considered asking Masego if it was possible to make more of him. With a Named wizard taking over the ritual, the second translocation was a breeze: Roland outright dismissed the attendant mages and handled it all himself, taking us into one of the larger wagon circles and muttering the incantation under his breath. With a sensation like having a stiff wind suddenly blown over my entire body, we went through after a mere quarter hour of chanting and when my eyes opened it was to the sight of a slab of stone standing surrounded by nothing. Behind us was only void and ahead of us was another slab of stone, but only one.

"I took us through a shortcut," Roland told me. "Otherwise we'd be stuck going through several checkpoints."

"What is it with wizards and not putting up railings?" I wondered out loud, looking at the empty void surrounding us.

There was some quiet snickering from my soldiers, to my own amusement.

"Your horse can fly," Roland pointed out.

"My horse is only coming through with the wagons, so I am distinctly lacking wings at the moment," I replied. "Crows, at least it doesn't rain in here."

Just the thought of treading slippery-slick wet stone with only nothingness around was enough to have me want to wince. I'd worked through most of my old fear of heights, but half-finished dimensions like this were in a category of their own.

"I'll be sure bring up your complaints at the next monthly assembly," the Rogue Sorcerer amusedly said.

He took the lead, walking assuredly through the first stone slab and then not pausing as he reached the end of the second. With reason, as there was another slab in place under his foot before it could be put down. I looked back, wondering if the first slab would disappear, but it was still there. This was unlikely to be a conjuration, I decided – it'd take a massive amount of power to make something like stone slab out of seemingly nothing – but odds were this was from too esoteric a branch of sorcery for me to be able to make a proper guess besides. I simply followed, as did my personal guard, and Roland led us through a walk of perhaps half an hour in a straight line before we reached a significantly larger slab, where a circle of silvery light the size of a door was hanging in the air.

"The shortcut leads into the most heavily defended part of the Arsenal," Roland told us. "Do not be alarmed by the steel and spells awaiting you on the other side, they are a mere precaution."

"Reassuring," Hakram drily replied.

While the defences were slowing our way, even with a shortcut being what we took, I could not help but approve of how thoroughly the safety of the Arsenal was being seen to. I was one of the few who'd been brought in on the nature of the place, so I was aware that the Arsenal itself was in neither the Twilight Ways, Arcadia or even Creation: Hierophant had, using Warlock's old research and what he'd learned by stealing the ruins of Liesse, hung a fortress in a stable dimension somewhere *between* Twilight and Creation. The Witch of the Woods had then gone a step further and grafted on the Threshold, less dimensional pockets between the Arsenal and everything else. That was where we were right now, and that gate ahead ought to be the last

hurdle in getting in. Roland saw to it quickly, tracing the hanging edge with his fingers until it filled silver and speaking in cadenced mage tongue until the circle had become a rectangular door anchored on the ground.

"I'll have to be last to cross," he told us. "But the way is open, go ahead."

"See you on the other side, then," I shrugged.

I limped through, ignoring a half-hearted protest by my escort that one of them should be first to cross. It wasn't all that different from a fairy gate, I decided as I crossed, though somehow more... precise. Travelling Arcadia or the Ways was a journey, while this was more like... walking up or down stairs. The other side was, I found out, a beautifully designed killing field. Flat stone grounds overlooked by tall structures leading into corridors, bristling with soldiers and engines of war, and even just striding through and onto the stone I could already feel the sorcery buzzing in the air. Wards and enchantments and half a dozen other things too. My escort followed me through as I limped forward, at least a hundred soldiers looking down on us, and I noted that the only way through was a stairway wedged between the heights. I waited until Roland crossed as well, the gate closing behind him, and only then noticed that someone was coming down the stairs. I smiled, recognizing him immediately.

Though Masego was tall as ever, he'd gained some weight since I last saw him. Nowhere near what he'd worn when he was still young, but at least enough he no longer seemed thin – though he was still built like a scholar, not a warrior, as there was not much muscle to his frame. The long braids going down his back had shed some of the ornaments they'd worn, now limited to one ring per braid. Most of them gold but a few silver and even bronze. All of them carved with runes. His robes were no longer the old black ones he'd taken to wearing after becoming the Hierophant, instead a more ornate grey set touched with tiles of pale green and paler gold. The cloth band that covered his eyes matched the grey of the robes, though it was not broad enough to hide the glimmering light of Summer's sun still dwelling within his glass eyes. Masego looked, well, hale and happy. To my admitted surprise.

I'd not exactly expected him to waste away here, but I *had* expected that without one of us to keep an eye on him he'd go through an obsessive phase the way he had after the Observatory was first built – only without Indrani around to force him to eat and actually talk to people. Evidently I'd been wrong, and I was pleased to learn it. Masego swept down the stairs and, to my deepening surprise, brought me in for a short embrace before leaning down and kissing my cheeks one after the other.

"I, uh," I eloquently said. "Hello, Masego. It's good to see you."

Hierophant looked rather pleased with himself, standing a little straighter.

"And it is good to see you, Catherine," he said. "We have much to talk about."

A pause of a heartbeat.

"I would also enjoy catching up," he mused.

I choked on a startled burst of laughter before coughing into my fist, though I found myself grinning like a fool. Some things never changed, huh? It just wouldn't be Masego without the effortless praise and insults, neither of which were entirely meant to be offered.

"I have missed you, Zeze," I admitted.

I patted the side of his elbow and he withdrew, straightening his perfectly straight robes. While I'd been distracted Adjutant had come to stand at my side, and the dark-skinned practitioner tuned to him afterwards.

"Hakram," Masego smiled. "Good. I have been meaning-"

"Win a shatranj and I'll consider changing the hand," the orc replied.

"I have been practicing," Masego swore. "And I have this lovely artefact, which has fingers but also shoots lightning and -"

"Shoots lightning?" I mused. "Hakram, you should reconsider."

I was only halfway screwing with him, since I could think of a lot of situations where shooting lightning might be useful. Like, a solid half of all the conversations I'd ever had in my life.

"Masego, please stop bartering away ancient Mavii artefacts," Roland sighed. "Especially when our ownership of them is dubious to begin with."

"It was my understanding that grave-robbing is allowed when a hero is the one doing it," Masego replied, sounding surprised. "Surely that is not invalidated simply because it was a *heroine* instead."

His tone implied a degree of appalment at the discrimination involved, which had me breathing in sharply so I would not laugh.

"That's not," the Rogue Sorcerer began, "I mean - you ought to... we can discuss this later, Hierophant."

I suppressed my grin. Masego's occasional bouts of well-meaning earnestness had always been near impossible to ward against, in my experience. The humour faded, though, when I considered what was still ahead.

"So," I said, eyes on Masego, "I hear from Roland we've got a bit of a situation on our hands."

Hierophant's face brightened.

"Oh," he said. "That reminds me: I have been asked by the Hunted Magician to arrange an audience with you at your earliest convenience."

I did not groan, because I was a grown woman – sadly enough, as grown as I'd ever get – and a queen and I'd not yet found a way to pawn this off to anyone else.

"Lovely," I muttered.

"The Blessed Artificer also requests such an audience," Roland said, coming up behind me. "She wants to lodge a complaint under the Terms."

My brow rose.

"What about?" I asked.

The Rogue Sorcerer looked meaningfully at Masego, who looked unimpressed.

"The device blinded me," he said. "I will not apologize for breaking it."

The device had *what*? If some fucking heroine thought she could take a swing at Masego and that I'd then make him apologize for it just to keep the peace, then someone was in need of a rude awakening. My friend might not be the deftest of hands when it came to avoiding giving offence, but on the other hand I'd almost never seen him resort to violence without dire provocation himself.

"Who did what now?" I asked, lips thinning.

"I'll not get into it without her being there," Roland said. "There is little point. Something to discuss when we are not standing in the middle of the translocation area, yes?"

Fair enough, I silently conceded. I wasn't like we were in anyone's way, but I should settle in my guards and take up quarters of my own instead of standing around. Besides, considering the treasury of Callow had pitched in to pay for building this place I was rather due a tour of this Arsenal. I would have preferred to visit when the Named here weren't at each

other's throats, but if wishes were horses than beggars would ride.

"You have me there," I easily said. "Which of you fine gentlemen volunteers to-"

A silver rectangle opened behind us, though more than ten feet to the left of where own door out of the Threshold had stood.

"Roland," I said. "Was anyone else supposed to come today?"

By the shortcut, too, if I was correct.

"No that I know of," the Rogue Sorcerer grimly replied.

"To the stairs," I barked at my guards.

We'd only barley begun to withdraw when a silhouette came out. My staff rose, until I caught sight of the perfectly polished shield the figure bore. The Mirror Knight gathered his bearings, then started in surprise when he caught sight of me. I ought to have been the one surprised, really: after all, he was meant to be in Cleves right now.

So what the Hells was he doing *here*?

Chapter 14: Audience

"To boast of an opinion unchanged is to boast of wearing child's clothing."

– Atalantian saying

The Mirror Knight's appearance had me surprised, but the three other Named that followed him out pushed that over the edge and into consternation.

One of those I was already familiar with: the Blade of Mercy's youth and greatsword would have made him memorable enough even if I'd not once ripped out his arm to throw it in another hero's face as a distraction. Another Alamans, like the Mirror Knight, and one who'd strenuously argued against the Terms before they were forced through with the Pilgrim and the White Knight's backing. The other two took me a moment to place, as I'd only ever heard of them through reports. But heard of them I had, and they were not unknown quantities. Short, stocky and painted in colours that belonged to no Blood, the Exalted Poet looked like he belonged in a Dominion shield wall instead of the pleasure palaces of Levante he was said to have been conscripted from. Archer had mentioned to me he'd once been among the Hidden Poets, some highly prestigious Levantine society of poets and singers, until he'd somehow touched upon some truth of the Heavens through his words. Yet for all that he did not wield Light – he was a

spellcaster, if a middling one, and likely how the band had come through.

The last of the four was a Callowan, though she wasn't one of mine in any sense. She'd allegedly fled in the early years after the Conquest, and she was the only one who did not openly consider herself one of Above's champions. The Maddened Keeper looked instead like a perennially exhausted woman in her early twenties, skin drawn and pale and her dark hair ratty. Her threadbare robes ever rumpled and she was thin, but there was a sense of... menace about her. Not like a snake coiling but rather like a diseased thing, the sight of which had you withdraw your hand out of fear and disgust. She was host, it was rumoured, to a great many old secrets that should have stayed unknown – and had even turned herself into a living seal on a Hell Egg from Triumphant's days. After the Mirror Knight himself she was the one of that bunch I'd be most wary of fighting. I knew from personal experience that one didn't rub elbows with entities on the darker side of the fence without learning some rather nasty tricks.

"Mirror Knight," I said, tone cool. "I was under the impression your duties kept you in Cleves."

Adjutant fell on my left side to cover by bad leg, as naturally as taking a breath, and he did not need to reach for a blade for the heroes to tense. Christophe, for that was the Mirror Knight's name, looked as surprised to see me as I was to see him. The Blade of Mercy's hands closed around the handle of his greatsword so strongly the metal creaked as he stared me down with pale eyes and clenched teeth. I was meant to be respectable, these days, so I refrained from asking him how his arm was doing. The Poet looked calm, and had even warily stepped away from the Blade, but the Maddened Keeper was looking at me blearily through the long strands of her ratty hair.

"And I was under the impression I need not answer to you, Black Queen," the Mirror Knight replied, back straightening.

"Christophe, you speak to the anointed queen of Callow," the Rogue Sorcerer mildly said. "Have you forgotten your courtesies?"

Roland had stepped between myself and the newcomers, while I was studying them, and though he seemed calm I recognized the tension to his stance from the last time he and I had been in a mess together. He'd not known about this either, then. I'd not expected him to, but these days my trust came slower and died more swiftly than ever before. The world had gotten larger, the older I got, and ever more complex. There were fewer certainties left in my life than I'd like. To my surprise, Roland's admonishment actually seemed to strike true with the Mirror Knight. A flicker of something like regret passed across his

face, and the man offered me what a generous soul might call a bow.

"That was not one of the usual portals," Masego suddenly said, voice cutting through the room. "And there is more coming."

The glass eyes beneath the cloth were staring at what I would have thought to be nothingness, but then I was not the Hierophant. There were only three other Named with Christophe, I noted once more. I'd thought him one short of a band of five, and that a good sign, but was he really?

"What are you doing here, Mirror Knight?" I asked, tone grown colder. "The Arsenal is not a hostel anyone can visit when the whim strikes. Explain yourself."

My gaze swept by the armoured hero and onto the rest of his companions, flat and unfriendly.

"That question stands for the rest of you," I said. "Two of you ought to be in Cleves, and the —"

"Hooves," the Maddened Keeper suddenly said. "Someone rides."

My brow rose. That implied whatever was coming was not with them, which only further added to my confusion. Supplies, maybe? There would be carriages and wagons for those. It should be too early for it to be my own, though I supposed time did tend to get rather fluid when it came to places like this. No telling what it was.

"You tneed to ask why I am here, Queen of Faithlessness?" the Mirror Knight sneered. "Fine, play your games if you must. I am here to prevent the murder you've plotted."

The what now? Wait, was he talking about the way Prince Gaspard of Cleves might bargain himself into a slit throat if he didn't curb his ambitions? Because I'd not even begun to pursue that, choosing instead to delay until I spoke with the First Prince before beginning to act.

"Have we been plotting murder?" Masego asked, sounding a little bemused. "People never tell me these things. You should write more often, Catherine."

I closed my eyes and sighed. The last part was probably true, I'd give him that at least.

"See, even the Hierophant admits it," the Blade of Mercy triumphed. "A murder here in the Arsenal, where no word will escape of it—"

"This is absurd," Roland flatly said, "and beneath you as well, Antoine. Are we now nothing more than a pack of street thugs

throwing around wild accusations? We set down rules to address suspicions like the one you have brought, and swore to follow them."

"*Va te faire foutre, Sorcier,*" the Blade of Mercy cursed in a hiss. "You might have forgotten the butchery at the Camps so you can get comfortable playing the wizard in your little tower, but we are not all so eager to be bought out of our principles."

"What principles would these be?" Hakram gravelled. "All I see is a handful of Named who were caught breaking agreements and now spin unlikely tales to dig their way out."

"It is no breach of the Terms to come to the Arsenal," the Exalted Poet said in Chantant, and I started at how gorgeous his voice was.

Warm and full-throated, like honey for the ear. I could understand why he'd never had to work a day in his life, with a voice like that: people would have thrown coppers at him just to hear him list out the chores of the day.

"That may be true. Lacing your voice with sorcery when speaking to other Named *is*, however," Hierophant said, tone gone icy.

The warmth left me, gone as if by a snap of the finger. I frowned, eyeing the Poet rather more warily than before.

"Who throws wild accusations now?" the Blade of Mercy said.

"Keep your lackeys in hand, Black Queen," the Mirror Knight ordered me. "This is disgraceful."

My fingers clenched around my staff of yew.

"What," I asked very gently, "did you just say to me?"

"Did I perhaps stutter?" the Mirror Knight smiled.

I breathed out, mastered the frozen vicious thing that was roaring in my veins. *At seventeen, you arrogant little shit, I would have answered that sword in hand.* But now I had responsibilities, and no matter how fucking satisfying it would be to make the prick spit out his teeth it would also be a major incident. The Truce and the Terms, I knew, would already be stretched to a breaking point by the killing of a villain no matter how the matter was resolved. If the representative for Below's lot assaulted the most famous Proceran hero alive the same week, they might just snap. I told myself this again and again until the anticipation of that smirking jackass bleeding from the mouth had left my knuckles, and only then spoke again.

"Under the Terms, I judge your presence here to be suspect and your behaviour needlessly provocative," I said, voice cool. "You

will be held under guard until the White Knight is here to speak on your behalf."

Outrage was the answer, and the Blade of Mercy laughed scornfully, but I was not finished,

"Set your weapons down on the ground, right now," I said. "All of you. You will use neither sorcery, Light nor Name until it is made explicitly clear to you it is permissible once more."

"I did not mean to breach the Terms," the Exalted Poet said, raising his hands, "and will not add further insult to the injury."

The voice was just as gorgeous as before, I thought, but it wasn't so... attention-grabbing anymore. Huh, interesting. A little like fae glamour, then? That made him an odd duck compared to the usual Dominion lot, who rarely resorted to tricks on the more subtle side.

"You bloody coward," the Blade of Mercy swore. "Have you no pride?"

"Roland," the Mirror Knight gravely said, "did you not hear her speak? Hear the threat she threw at our feet like challenger's glove?"

The Rogue Sorcerer's face was a blank mask.

"If Hanno had given the order to a group of Named, I would have backed him without hesitation," Roland replied. "Christophe, swallow your damned pride for an hour. It is not worth what your swaggering threatens to bring down upon all our heads. I do not know what brings you here, but I have *been* here all this time and I tell you now that you are mistaken."

The Mirror Knight hesitated. I kept my mouth shut, even though by all fucking rights in the eyes of Gods and crowns just my giving the order here should have been enough, because I was not so enamoured of my pride that I'd knife a method that seemed to be working.

"It was a villain that was slain," Roland continued, "and-"

"See," the Blade of Mercy spat, "see? It is *exactly* as we learned. Some wizard rapist got nothing more than he deserved and now they would slay a Chosen in cold blood for it."

"And how did you learn this, I wonder?" Adjutant asked, voice calm.

"Orcs have-" the Blade of Mercy began-

"Finish that sentence," I mildly said. "And I will have to answer it."

I met his eyes, pale blue, and idly ran a finger just to the side of my shoulder. About where I'd ripped his out with my bare hands, the last time we'd fought. The boy flinched, until his eyes glowed with Light and he leaned forward instead.

"Answer the Adjutant's question, Christophe," Roland said. "Something is afoot."

"I will not unmask our friend in these walls so that you might silence them and hide the next sin from our eyes," the Mirror Knight harshly replied. "Queen you might be, Catherine Foundling, but you are *no queen of mine*."

Was I supposed to be stung by that? I sometimes pitied Cordelia Hasenbach for the fact that the blunders of her nation's heroes inevitably reflected on her and counted my blessings that the closest thing to a hero I had to answer for was Vivienne Dartwick. Once in a while, I supposed, I did get a stroke of luck.

"I didn't ask you to kneel," I said. "But I did ask you to put your fucking sword on the ground, *Christophe*. I can't help but notice you haven't even managed that much."

"And what will you do, if I do not deign to indulge you?" the man smirked.

"Do not think," I softly said, "that I will not beat some sense into your empty head, if you leave me no other choice."

"What do I have to fear of Night?" the Mirror Knight chuckled. "Perhaps this is for the best, yes? Too long have better souls tread softly around your pride for fear of your *power*. You are in dire need of a--"

I'd have to aim it carefully, to finish it one blow. Just tossing Night around like some Secret-drunk ispe wouldn't do anything, the man had survived being submerged in acid with only light discomfort. The trick to it would be--

"Hooves," the Maddened Keeper sighed. "I told you."

The portal's opening was silent, though the shiver of power was not. A rider came through, leaning low against the neck of the horse to avoid hitting their head, and there was no missing the power wafting off of them. *Another* one?

"Weeping Heavens," I swore, throwing up my hands. "Is this a secret magic fortress or a bloody fish market?"

"We do have ponds," Masego helpfully told me in a whisper, "and some of them have fish."

"Thank you, Masego," I sighed. "But the fish weren't the point of the comparison."

"It's not a very good comparison, then," he informed me.

I did not answer that, because I had better things to do and also I couldn't think of anything that'd be a match for that serious earnestness he'd spoken with. For a moment, looking at the rider straightening in the saddle, I was genuinely unsure whether I was looking at a man or a woman. But then I caught sight of the ornate kingfishers carved into the armour and put one and one together. Frederic Goethal, the Prince of Brus. More importantly, the Kingfisher Prince: the only ruler Named in Procer I'd ever heard about outside old legends. Prince Frederic, I decided as I took in the perfect blond hair, slender jaw and fair skin, was *ridiculously* pretty. The mass of ribbons in his hair would have looked ridiculous, I thought, if a closer look did not reveal they were purple and silver. The Dead King's banners, torn up and made into vain ornaments.

The Prince of Brus had style, I had to give him that.

"My, it seemed I've stumbled onto quite the assembly," Prince Frederic laughed. "I dare not claim it was sent for on my behalf."

Eyes just a little too sharp for me to find them beautiful lingered on me, and the Prince of Brus offered me a theatrical bow from atop his horse.

"Queen Catherine, I must say it is a fine pleasure to meet you in person at last," he said. "I am, one might say, an admirer of your work up in Hainault."

The heroes I'd been about to draw on looked utterly befuddled by a Named prince of Procer quite literally riding into the middle of the confrontation. It calmed the waters some, took the edge off the stormy urgency everyone had been feeling in their air.

"I hear good things of you from my people, Prince Frederic," I replied, meaning every word. "Or do you prefer your Name instead?"

"There is less difference between one and the other than I would have thought," the man mused. "But Frederic is all I would require of you, Queen of Callow."

"How forward," I said, smothering a grin, but did not outright deny him.

It was just an Alamans thing, the grandiose manners and bold suggestions, but it was still flattering in its own way. Dismounting smoothly, the Prince of Brus set foot on the stone and offered a sweeping bow to the rest of the Named here.

"I am Frederic of the House of Goethal, Prince of Brus," he introduced himself.

"Did we invade that?" I heard Masego ask Hakram in a whisper. "He's very polite, if we invaded that."

"We haven't," Hakram replied in a whisper. "Too far north. And technically speaking we never invaded Procer. We were invited into Iserre by Prince Amadis Milenan."

"Oh, I get it," Masego said, tone brightening. "We never killed any Procerans either, we just stabbed them and then an unrelated death ensued. Politics is all about ignoring causality."

I decided, after a moment, to pretend I'd never heard that. The Kingfisher Prince greeted several the other two Proceran heroes by both Name and name, which seemed to rather move them, and charmed his way through introductions with the Poet and the Keeper. Who was, if I was not mistaken, blushing. Roland stood at my side, a rueful look on his face, and shrugged when I raised an eyebrow as if to say, *Alamans, what can you do?* The glance I traded with Hakram was more laden with meaning. *Retreat*, I asked him with my eyes, *or press forward?* He studied the heroes and the Prince of Brus for a moment, then nodded. Forward, he was saying. I was inclined to agree. Though in principle the Mirror Knight and the Blade of Mercy were of equal standing to the Kingfisher Prince, in matters of Truce and Terms at least, the way they behaved spoke differently. They were deferring, treating the man a superior whether they were conscious of it or not.

And I'd been around Alamans long enough now to learn that their culture frowned on making a scene when a superior was there to see. The trait was even more pronounced in highborn, who would be expected to 'remain graceful' to the extent that they'd have to face even an utter disaster with a smile and a pithy phrase instead of genuine emotion. It galled me that I'd have to use someone authority's as well as my own, but not so much that I wouldn't actually do it. I stepped into the circle, Hakram and Masego trailing behind, inserting myself into the ongoing conversation.

"- it was the of the Bitter Blacksmith's make as it happens, though not the one here," the Prince of Brus said, touching the sword at his hip with a smile. "The younger brother of the pair. His blades are in high demand, and Revenants have learned to fear their sight."

"I am sure that stories would be best traded in comfortable a place than this room," I said. "Your horse will need stabling as well, Prince Frederic."

"Every time title is used, Queen Catherine, my heart breaks a little more," the man said, hand over his heart.

"Frederic, then," I smiled, against my own better judgement, but the mirth went away as I turned to the four unexpected guests. "As was discussed earlier, your unexpected presence at the Arsenal means you'll have to remand yourself to the custody the guards until the White Knight can be scryed. I expect you've no issue with this?"

"None at all, Black Queen," the Exalted Poet immediately conceded.

"A place with little light, please," the Maddened Keeper said. "Queen of Lost and Found."

My eyes narrowed as I looked at the haggard woman. That was not one of my better-known titles, much less by someone who should not have ever gone anywhere the Firstborn. This one was worth keeping an eye on. I smiled at the Mirror Knight and the Blade of Mercy, who were both doing poorly at hiding their anger. But they were only two against many, and likely to disgrace themselves in everyone's eyes if they fought back against my very reasonable request.

"Of course," the Mirror Knight said. "We will do what is right."

"We always do," the Blade of Mercy said, looking at me defiantly.

I glanced at Roland, who nodded. I'd trust him with seeing to that, then. I knew not the officers that must be spoken to or the places the heroes would have to be stashed away until Hanno could either free my hands to deal with this mess or deal with it himself.

"I'm sure one of the guards can show you to the stables," I told Frederic Goethal. "I'm afraid I cannot claim the same."

"Every hour parted from you will be a torment," the Prince of Brus assured me, "but I may be able to withstand it, for the promise of a cup of wine shared at a later date?"

"Best you bring the bottle," I told him, tacitly accepting, "I know little of Proceran wines."

Even when it came to Callowan bottles, I only knew so much. Gods, I realized with some amusement, I could name more sorts of liquor than wine.

"A journey of discovery is always a pleasant evening to share, Queen Catherine," the Kingfisher Prince smiled, and with a bow took his leave.

A charmer, that one, I considered. That made him that dangerous, if rather pleasant. The heroes left, until the only ones here in this strange room in this strange place were of the Woe: Masego and Hakram, who I would trust so long as I still had it in me to trust anything at all. I breathed out, then, appreciating how close to fighting this had come. The heroes were bucking the Terms and bucking them *hard*. Those two Proceran hotheads were trouble, had been from the start, but I'd thought that Hanno's word would be enough to keep them in line. That belief was starting to wane, unfortunately, and if words failed then there was only one way left.

"Fuck," I muttered. "This is going to get worse, isn't it?"

I knew better than to believe house arrest would keep a hero contained. Which meant I now had to take this situation in hand before the fucking idiots broke the agreements that were keeping Named pointed north at Keter instead of squabbling.

"Find me a room I can receive people in, Zeze," I asked Masego. "And then get me the Hunted Magician."

"Are you not going to settle into your quarters?" Hierophant asked, cocking his head to the side.

"I'll rest when I'm dead," I sighed.

Better that than everyone else dying, I supposed.

"And Hakram-" I began.

"I'll see what bottles I can rustle up," the orc agreed.

Ah, Adjutant, that prince among men. What would I do without him?

—

I'd expected to end up in a glorified scholar's nook, but perhaps that'd been naïve of me. After all the Arsenal had been built on the Grand Alliance's gold with the understanding that it would be receiving some of the finest minds from three nations as well as packs of Named. Moreover, for something like the Mirage – that great enchanted room that'd been sold to me as the sorcerous step beyond scrying – to be worth making, there would have to be fitting accommodations for the few people on Calernia that would actually be allowed to use that room. That meant that an entire wing of the Arsenal, named the Alcazar, had been built for that purpose. There were luxurious private quarters, there, and

private dining rooms, but also the kind of parlour where a prince or a queen could receive important guests away from prying ears.

Masego had cut me loose in the wing after bringing me there, admitting he was less than familiar with the place and so of limited use, and instead gone off to find the Hunted Magician. The attendants here, though, had sorted me out. I'd requested something 'intimate', which was what rich people called small, since I'd not brought a household with me and the villain I was going to receive was both Proceran and mostly likely highborn. Better the lack of personal attendants be taken as preference for privacy than an admission I'd simply not brought any. Or had any, to be honest. Even when I'd spent most my time in Laure, I'd kept a rather modest house by royal standards. Enough that Anne Kendall had once praised me for my frugality, and that thought had me reaching for the bottle of *aragh* that Hakram had somehow gotten his hands on.

I'd been a while since I'd last thought of the once Baroness of Dormer, who'd been my Governess-General and died so senselessly in the Night of Knives. Her and people dearer to me, like Ratface, whose death Malicia would one day answer for.

I gulped down the thimble I'd filled, the roaring warmth of the Taghrebi liquor spreading down my throat, and leaned back into the cushiony Proceran sofa I'd claimed as my seat. The parlour was not large, two sofas and a low table taking up the greater part of the room while service tables and tapestries took up the rest. It would serve for my purposes, as would the bottle of *aragh* set on that nice polished table along with one wet thimble and one still dry. Adjutant stood behind my seat, to the side, since he was here as my second and not a villain his own right. I'd not expected for Masego to return with the Hunted Magician, since he'd see little point in walking back and forth the Arsenal for courtesies he only dimly paid attention to, so I was not surprised when it was only the Magician that was announced by attendants. The man was ushered in, and as he bowed I took the time to study the man that Hierophant's indifference to matters of status had allowed to become chief among the villains of the Arsenal.

Nearing or past thirty, I decided, well-dressed in fine robes but leaning towards the practical – and I did mean *well* dressed, not *richly* dressed, which smelled of nobility to me. Good-looking and well-groomed, the stubble on his face sculpted, he was dark of hair and his eyes straddled the line between grey and blue. No one knew his name, only his Name, and the mystery around him had so far remained inscrutable. He cleaned up nicely, I thought, but that wasn't why I kept staring at him. There was something about the Hunted Magician, something strangely familiar. It was on the tip of my tongue and it was irritating me I couldn't quite spell it out.

"Queen Catherine, it is my honour," the Hunted Magician said, bowing respectfully.

I stared at him, some part of me feeling like I could just order him to kneel and he would. The certainty of that thought was what surprised me, because there was no room for so much as the shadow of a doubt in it and that was not something that came upon me often. Not anymore, thank the Gods. And just like that, it fell into place.

"Oh," I said, "you poor dumb bastard. Which Court is it that you sold your name to?"

The man twitched, then looked at me what I could only call naked fear. I was almost surprised Masego hadn't noticed it, but then I supposed that was not he part of fae nature Hierophant was familiar with: he'd studied fae, made use of them, but he'd never felt that power coursing through his veins. He knew it like a rider knew a horse, while I knew it like the horse knows the stride.

"I-" the Hunted Magician began, mouth gone dry. "I do not know what you mean, Your Majesty."

"I can *smell* it, Magician," I said. "They've still got a claim on you, and a debt like that can be pulled at by more than the true debtor. Can't be Summer, or I'd feel like smashing your skull open, and if it was Winter you would have physically balked at lying to me. So, which is it: Autumn or Spring?"

"It is true, then," he quietly said. "You were, for a time, queen amongst the Fae."

"I scavenged that crown," I said, "and it ever sat ill on my brow. I was glad to be rid of it. Answer my question, Hunted Magician."

I did not Speak – I'd lost the talent when I ceased being the Squire, and my new Name was not so close to coalescing that I could call on old tricks – but he shivered anyway. There was an echo of power there that had a call on him, much as he would like to deny it.

"Autumn," the villain answered. "It was Autumn I bargained with."

And you use Maviii runes that not even Masego can seem to figure it out, I thought, so I don't really need to ask what you bargained for, do I? Ancient knowledge seemed a petty thing to sell your name for, but then that'd never been my calling.

"Good," I smiled. "Then I have a use for you, Magician."

"I have evaded the eye of the Prince of Falling Leaves, remaining free of eternal servitude," the Hunted Magician angrily said, "I'll not suffer the yoke of the Black Queen instead."

"I'm not going to make you into a puppet," I snorted, "I'm going to speak to Hierophant so that you might be brought in onto a project of ours that the Kingdom of Callow backs above all others. You have the potential to greatly contribute, and so be greatly rewarded."

Masego had been running into trouble proving his Quartered Seasons theory, but if we could bring into the work someone who had a lasting tie to Autumn then doors would open. And I'd just discovered I could squeeze the Hunted Magician rather hard if I felt like it, so I was even fairly comfortable bringing him in. Already my mood was improving.

"That can wait for later, though," I dismissed. "You wanted an audience, Magician. Well, you have it."

I gestured vaguely, inviting him to proceed. The man straightened in his seat.

"The death of the Wicked Enchanter was not happenstance, a stroke of fateful misfortune," the Hunted Magician told me. "This is a plot, Black Queen, and we are all in danger."

Chapter 15: Machinations

"A ruler should always join regicide plots: is the finest possible teacher for a locksmith not a thief?"

– Dread Emperor Traitorous

I poured myself another finger of aragh, since it was quite evidently going to be one of *those* days.

"A bold claim," I said, "but I am open to the notion."

The Hunted Magician would, by my reckoning, have spent Gods only knew how many years pursued by a prince of the fae. Most likely through agents as there would have been... waves if a fae noble of that calibre came into Creation to collect a debt, but the old Courts of Arcadia had come by their reputation of always getting their due honestly. It would have been a constant ordeal of enemies hidden under glamour, pursuit that could not be shaken off by simple distance and terrifying visions both sleeping and waking. The occasional complaints I'd gotten about the man being cryptic, distrustful and generally unpleasant now had an explanation. Living in a world where there might be an enemy hidden behind any smiling face, with forced servitude as the consequence of making even a single mistake, had a way of making people paranoid to the bone.

The thing was that the kind of enemies I was up against did actually warrant that level of caution. The Dead King had been three steps ahead of the rest of the world this entire war, the Intercessor had been out of sight for an unsettling amount of time and that was setting aside the most dangerous enemy of all: simple, petty human nature. The trouble here would not be the paranoia itself but figuring out if the Hunted Magician's paranoia was the *right sort* of paranoia.

"Two weeks ago, the Blessed Artificer received news that troubled her a great deal," the Hunted Magician told me. "I know not what they were, but I do know that some of the other Chosen here began acting oddly around the same time."

"And how would you know that?" I mildly asked.

"The Bitter Blacksmith was herself unchanged, and did not seem to notice any difference," the Magician said.

I traced the rim of my cup with a finger.

"You misunderstand me," I said, *and perhaps on purpose*, I did not speak out loud. "How do you know that the Blessed Artificer received such news?"

The man did not answer, his face turning into a pleasant mask that was just a little too sloppy to be believed. It didn't reach the eyes, which to a Praesi would be counted as a beginner's mistake. He did not trust me, which was fine, but that distrust was getting in the way of my finding answers and that was not acceptable. Using coercion here would only make things worse, I decided. Threats would serve to make me an enemy and that was not the role I wanted to play in this conversation. Another approach would be needed.

"I am observant," the Hunted Magician replied.

"So you are," I mused. "You must work closely with the Artificer?"

His eyes narrowed.

"On occasion," he said.

"This is unrelated to the current conversation," I elaborated. "I'm told she wishes to lodge a complaint under the Terms about some device being broken, and I would like some understanding of the technicalities involved coming from someone else than the plaintiff."

A chance to exert influence, which I knew he'd want to take: one did not become the informal speaker for villains in the Arsenal by *accident*. It was ambition, and ambition was a familiar beast.

"It is not my field of speciality, but I do have some insights," the Hunted Magician said.

"Do you know what it was meant to accomplish?" I said. "Or at least what it might have been based on?"

"The underlying principles had some similarity to an artefact displayed by the Repentant Magister last year," the Magician said, "though I am unsure whether or not you'd be familiar with it."

Underlying principles, huh. No, that could still be shop talk between colleagues.

"Made of the same materials?" I asked, pitching my voice in surprise.

The Proceran mage suppressed a smirk. *That's right, I thought, I'm just some uneducated mudfoot from Callow. Lord your knowledge of me, you know you want to.* I'd bet rubies to piglets the man was highborn, and some of that stayed in the marrow even when you left the life behind.

"Light favours different materials than sorcery," the Hunted Magician told me. "She chose them accordingly."

"So you saw the device as it was being built," I said.

The man went still as stone.

"Adjutant," I mused. "Do remind me – can projects without official sanction be built in the official crafting rooms of the Workshop?"

"They cannot," Hakram gravelled. "Though it is allowed in one's private quarters, on their own time."

A beat passed.

"So," I smiled, "you've been sleeping with the Blessed Artificer."

"I was simply visiting-"

"I would invite you," I mildly said, "to consider very carefully whether or not you want to lie to me."

The Haunted Magician's mouth closed. Yeah, I'd thought as much.

"I like to operate by a simple rule, when it comes to keeping an eye on my Damned fellows," I told him amicably. "Don't make it my problem, and I won't treat it like one."

Looming behind me, a tower of muscles and fangs in burnt plate, Hakram stared the man down.

"Are you going to be a problem, Haunted Magician?" Adjutant growled.

"I came to lend aid," the man protested.

Good, he was off-balance. Time to press.

"So aid me," I smiled. "Have you been sleeping with the Bitter Blacksmith as well?"

He did not immediately answer, and I had to hide my utter surprise. Godsdamn, that'd been a shot in the dark since he'd specifically named her as well: I'd actually wanted him to deny it so I could twist it into a confirmation he *was* sleeping with the Artificer. The silence was as good as an admission, though. I cocked my head to the side, studying him carefully.

"I am impressed," I said, and he smirked, "that you haven't gotten your head caved in."

Would you look at that, the smirk was gone. Probably helped that neither of those heroines were fighting Named, I mused, though that hardly made them shyly blushing maidens. Still if he'd tried to pull something like that with, say, the Painted Knife and the Vagrant Spear? There'd be a mistake-shaped corpse propped up in front of me instead of a living man.

"That makes you a useful source of information," I mused.

That reassured him as it was meant to, though he tried to hide it. If I'd tried to assure him I held no ill intentions towards him he wouldn't have bought it for a second, but from villain to another an open admission of usefulness was one of the most prized guarantees of safety.

"You said the Artificer was troubled," I said, "and others began acting oddly. Expand on this."

"She put an end to our trysts, irregular as they were," the Hunted Magician admitted. "And I saw her speaking with the Repentant Magister frequently afterwards, when they have never been close."

Shit, Nephele too? She'd not struck me as the scheming type when we last met, but a flirty acquaintance wasn't exactly understanding in depth.

"And the oddness?" I asked.

"They've several times gone to the general archives, both together and separately," the Magician said, "and the two times I

spied on them it was the old assembly transcripts they were going through. Specifically, those of the monthly sessions."

What were those for again? Roland had not long ago joked about bringing up my complaint about lack of railings in one, but they couldn't be just a general venting of complaints. It'd be a waste of time to make the ten Named based at the Arsenal sit through these. Of course, asking would make me look like I'd missed what he was implying. Which I had, but *he* didn't need to know that. Cowing people stopped working when they saw you stumble.

"Allocation of personnel and resources, general financing," Hakram said. "Do you have a notion of what they were trying to piece together?"

Ah, Adjutant to the rescue. So, going scavenging through the records of what and who had been allocated to projects those two had been trying to figure out the nature of one they hadn't been brought in on. There weren't many of those, only three. As I recalled the Hunted Magician and the Sinister Physician – who was also one of mine – were working on a 'plague' that would affect undead, under the appellation of Late Regret. Roland and the Concocter were working on a brew that'd affect undead like holy water and could feasibly be produced in sufficient quantity to contaminate the northern lakes, called Sudden Abjuration. The last was actually under debate to be opened to all Named, an attempt by Blind Maker and the Repentant Magister to make an artefact that'd prevent the Dead King from actively possessing undead within a certain range.

Only the last of the three was showing promising results, though it was also the one whose success would be hardest to prove: Neshamah was clever enough to pretend it was working to take us by surprise after we'd come to rely on it. The Haunted Magician hesitated, and not because it was Adjutant who'd asked the question. It was well-known to everyone by now that when Hakram spoke it was with my voice.

"I believe," he finally said, "that they were not interested in what was in the records so much as what was *not*."

My face remained calm, because it was not the first time an ugly surprise had been sprung on me today. Hells, it wasn't even the first time *today*. I reached for my cup of aragh and sipped. *Shit*. Was this about Quartered Seasons, then? Hierophant was the only Named on that and we'd kept it very, very quiet. Hasenbach knew the name and that it could yield a potential tool for deicide, but on the Dominion side the only one I'd told was Tariq since Levantine nobles had famously loose lips. I'd wanted the Pilgrim to be able to vouch someone from Levant had been told and picked him in particular because it'd put out any talk of dishonour the moment the Peregrine's involvement was mentioned. It was even true that the funding and resources for Quartered Seasons

wouldn't be discussed in their little Named councils, since I'd made it clear to Masego that if need be the crown of Callow would fund it entirely on its own.

But there's only many so people within the Arsenal, and for some parts he would have needed helping hands, I thought. For drudgework and fetching records or even assembling mundane objects. Hells, just the use of limited ritual resources like high quality scrying tools or rare substances were trails that could be followed if you knew where to look – which Nephele would, since she was in on one of the quiet projects. The two heroines had been trying to figure out what had been used by figuring out what hadn't been allocated in the actual sessions: resources and staff that mysteriously never made it to the discussion, unexplained holes in the budget. Even if they had managed to pull it all together it still wouldn't be enough to actually know what Masego was trying to accomplish, but it might be enough to allow them to make a few educated guesses. Which as lot more dangerous than them actually knowing, in my opinion.

"Interesting," I finally said, putting down my cup. "But it's the killing of the Wicked Enchanter you mentioned when making claim of a plot."

"There have been rising tensions for weeks," the Hunted Magician said. "Incidents occur more and more frequently, and become graver – and then, in a fortress the size of the Arsenal, the Red Axe and the Wicked Enchanted simply *happen* to meet. Someone filled the cup, Black Queen, and then arranged for the drop that would make it run over."

And the thing was, that made perfect sense to me. But then I was speaking to a man for who paranoia had been the path to survival for years and coming back from fighting on a front against the Hidden Horror for two straight years. I was inclined to believe him because I'd grown used to death hiding in every shadow, which meant my judgement was not unbiased. *And if I tighten my grip too strongly around honest mistakes by heroes, I thought, I might just cause the incident I am trying to avoid.* There were more than twenty Named in the Arsenal, if I – a villain, however respected I was in some quarters – acted like I was trying to cover up something then *someone* was going to do something stupid. And when the first stone in the avalanche came down, it'd be beyond my power to turn the tide back.

"That is speculation, not proof of anything," I said.

The man's face fell into a mask again, this time trying to hide his anger.

"But I dislike the shape and timing of this," I conceded. "You were right to bring this to my attention. I'll take the situation in hand personally."

Anger was gone, a mix of relief and wariness in him instead. He must have been halfway decent at this at some point, I thought, since the reflexes were there. He was badly out of practice, though, and he'd learned some self-defeating habits since. Another detail adding an entry to the 'highborn who fled from the consequences of his actions' tally I was mentally keeping.

"Then I can only thank you for granting me this audience, Black Queen," the Hunted Magician said, bowing in his seat.

I didn't invite him to stay and share a drink, though it would have been good politics, as my mind was already considering what needed to be done and I was reluctant to let the pot keep boiling while I played courtesy games. Instead I rose to escort him out, then closed the door behind him and leaned against the wooden frame. Hakram poured himself a finger aragh in the cup the Magician had not used, then sat down on the edge of the sofa to sip at it.

"Two Named, if not more, were led to start digging around one of our most dangerous secrets," I said. "Another two Named, between who conflict is good as certain, happened to run into each other here. And now the Mirror Knight was sent here to prevent a 'murder', when even with the fluidity of time in the Ways it's near certain he was warned about the circumstances before they took place."

I grit my teeth.

"Once is accident, twice is coincidence," I began-

"Thrice is enemy action," Hakram finished.

Except that, when it came to Named, coincidences were nothing of the sort. Which meant my enemy had drawn first blood and then struck again before I even realized I was in a fight, so I was in dire need of catching up. I limped back to low table and took my drink in hand, tossing the rest of it back in a single swallow.

"You have a plan," Adjutant said.

"I have a step," I corrected. "What I need is someone with utter disregard for other people's privacy, an inveterate hunger for juicy gossip and a pathological need to screw with everyone until it's clear what makes them tick."

"Wouldn't it have been simpler," Hakram asked, "just to say Archer?"

—

I'd meant for Indrani to come to us but apparently she was currently eating, not all that inclined to move and the attendant

we'd sent to fetch her was afraid of her. Which, in all honesty, was probably smart of him. So instead I limped my way down to the meal hall with Hakram at my side, the two of us and our guide passing through corridors ghostly empty. The Alcazar, the part of the Arsenal meant to host important guests, was apparently connected to quite a few other sections by private halls not meant to be used by anyone else. It made sense, I supposed. If Cordelia Hasenbach needed to use the Mirage, she wouldn't want half the scholars in this place to watch her every time she headed there. I learned from our chatty guide that Archer had ignored her own guest rooms in the Alcazar to bunk elsewhere – Masego's quarters in the Belfry, at a guess – and that she'd never bothered to use the private eatery in there. She was eating the same commissary fare as everyone else, which I found odd given her appreciation for luxury.

It all made a great deal more sense when we entered a hall that could have seated four hundred and I saw she was the only person in it, sprawled lazily on a bench as she dipped pieces of bread in melted cheese and popped them into her mouth. Indrani did not need decadence to be brought to her, she brought decadence wherever she was.

"Did you make the kitchens cook this for you alone?" I called out. "I'd call it abuse of power, but honestly by your standards this is almost reasonable."

Practically inhaling another dipped piece of bread, Indrani swung around and rose to her feet in a single fluid gesture. It would have been a lot more impressive if she didn't have a string of melted cheese hanging off the corner of her mouth.

"Your Queenly Majesticness," Archer solemnly bowed, smothering a grin, "your most humble servant hath returned. I now pray most faithfully that Your Great Regality will smile on-"

With great pleasure, I stopped leaning on my staff just long enough to smack her on the crown of the head – or would have, if she'd not twisted around and caught the yew before pulling. Before I could so much as insult her I was made to stumble, caught by the waist and led into a dip before she kissed me. If I put a hand behind her neck it was purely to hang on, not because I was trying to lean into it and feel a little more of her. She withdrew with a smug grin, leaving my lips pleasantly bruised.

"You smell like cheese," I told her.

"You sound a little breathless," she replied, the smugness deepening.

"From trying not to breathe it in," I scorned, then parted from her with a step to the side.

"That aragh I got from you?" she asked, sounding interested.

I leaned forward and stole a piece of bread from her plate, dipping it and deftly popping it into my mouth. Huh, that really was quite good. Adjutant cleared his throat, reminding Archer that he was also there. The attendant had retired during my passing moment of distraction, though the more honest word for it might have been *fled*.

"I'm happy to see you too, big guy," Indrani warmly said, clasping his arm. "But you've got too much teeth for a dip of your own, if that's what you're hinting at."

"You've got too little to warrant a hint," Hakram replied without missing a beat. "But it's good to see you too, 'Drani."

Even as I laughed at the casual verbal backhand she'd received with a stunned *oof*, the tall orc picked her up in a hug as easily as if she were bag of turnips. She shrieked in laughter, her 'surprised struggling' somehow ending up with him being smacked on the side of the face quite a lot. She was put down on the long table little bird and tried to bat away my continuing pillaging of her meal – there was some Arlesite sausage there, the good stuff with the spices from the Free Cities, so I'd gleefully helped myself – only to be ignored by right of queenly prerogative.

"Did you come all the way here just to eat my food?" she complained.

"Callow pays for part of the food budget," I said, chewing on a mouthful, "so in a sense it was really always *my* food."

"It's sad how power will go to the head of even the most sensible of women," Archer sighed. "And you too, I guess, but-"

I threw a stripe of mustarded venison at her, though as expected she caught it. I'd been hungrier than I'd thought, I mused as I stole a stripe for myself. There was a sweet taste to the sauce as well that was delicious, and I let out a little noise of pleasure. In a sense the way I'd been when I'd still been Sovereign of Moonless Nights, requiring neither sleep nor food, had been better. It'd certainly been more efficient. But I still remembered the nights where it had all been like ashes in my mouth, when nothing but the hardest of liquors had tasted of anything at all, and I could only count my blessings that I was now rid of those times.

"Is no one going to offer me anything?" Hakam drily asked.

We ignored him, since it wasn't that large a plate.

"We have something of a problem," I told Indrani.

She nodded.

"I brought the killer in from the cold and didn't keep close enough a watch on her, that's on me," Archer frankly said. "Mind you, the man had it coming if even half the stories I heard are true."

The Wicked Enchanter had been, from what I beginning to grasp, broadly disliked and held in disgust. It shouldn't be difficult to find out exactly why, though likely unpleasant, but that wasn't what caught my attention. He'd been a villain even other villains were lukewarm about, one the heroes would be able to hold up as the kind of monster deserving the headman's block instead of the protection of the Truce. That was a problem, since it meant this wasn't just a thorny little mess to arbitrate: it was a knife someone had aimed at the Truce and the Terms themselves.

If the Red Axe was killed over this, I suspected the heroes would riot. If the Red Axe wasn't killed over this, I knew sure as I knew my own breath that the *villains* would riot. And on top of that, just adding more more disastrous insult to the injury one of the heroes I'd find it most difficult to beat into humility without killing him, the Mirror Knight, had just blown in with supporters and no warning to meddle. If it even looked like I was lenient on the Red Axe, the perception among the villains I spoke for would be that I'd been leaned on by one of the luminaries of the other side and given ground.

I'd look weak and Below's champions did not follow weakness, much less obey it.

"We're in a fight, 'Drani," I murmured. "And it's starting to look like we showed up to it already bleeding. I'm going to need you."

Archer's hazelnut eyes turned serious as she leaned forward.

"You have me," she said. "Are the heroes taking a swing?"

"I don't know yet," I grimly replied. "But we're in a story, Archer, make no mistake. And it's one meant to cut us deep."

And it might just be my imagination, I thought, the habit of seeing a grinning skull in every dark corner... but I can almost the smell the cheap booze in the air, hear the mocking tune from the badly strung lute. I took the pretty silver knife on the side of Archer's plate, idly flipping it through my knuckles as I stepped back from the table.

"There are now," I said, "twenty-three Named within these walls."

That we knew of. Certainty was a necessity for Named, if you wanted to ever be more than a middling swordhand in the middle of nowhere, but this early and when the game afoot was still shrouded it would be a mistake to believe we knew everything about the board there was to be known.

"The Arsenal usually counts five heroes, three villains and two Named of unclear allegiance," Hakram said.

I took to tapping the flat of the silver blade against the side of my fist, thoughtful.

"The Concocter's one of ours," Archer said. "She keeps it quiet but the things that end up in her cauldrons aren't always the sort the Heavens would approve of, if you catch my drift."

Charming. Five to four, then, and with the Doddering Sage being the only uncertain – though more because his bouts of lucidity were rare than because of any reluctance to pick a side, as I understood it. That was still ten Named who stayed in the Arsenal on a more or less permanent basis, and most of them would have ways to communicate with the outside world beyond those the Grand Alliance had made available to them.

"You've got four," I said, eyes turning to Archer.

"Half and half," she cheerfully said.

And she'd brought in the Red Axe as well, who was now being held in a cell. Then another five Named after that: the Mirror Knight and his close friend the Blade of Mercy, the seemingly cautious Exalted Poet and the ambiguous Maddened Keeper, and last of all the gallant but decidedly dangerous Kingfisher Prince. Throwing in Adjutant and more generously my own nascent Name brought us at twenty-three. Twelve heroes, nine villains and two whose nature was not so clear-cut. Enough that the villains would feel outnumbered, and dangerously so since one of them had just been killed. Yet the heroes would feel pressured as well, given the quality of the opposition: four of the Woe were here, and our reputation was a weighty thing. The two poor bastards in between would be seen as potentially decisive in any clash, and so worth forcing the allegiance of – either to get rid of liabilities before blades came out or to secure a nasty surprise to spring on the opposition when they did.

It was a murderous brew someone was pressing to the lips of the entire Truce and Terms, and all it'd take was for one fool to be scared enough to drink.

"The Arsenal regulars are the thread that should be quickest to unwind," Adjutant said. "Someone set the Repentant Magister and the Blessed Artificer after a secret – it may truly be Quartered

Seasons, it may be something else. But they were contacted, and that is a concrete thing."

There were five under Above in these Arsenal 'regulars': Roland, the Blind Maker, the Repentant Magister, the Blessed Artificer and the Bitter Blacksmith. The Hunted Magician had implied that his 'close study' of the Blacksmith had revealed no change in mood around the time the Magister and the Artificer began digging, so she was not a likely suspect. I closed my eyes to think.

"So we find them in their rooms and make them spit out a name," Indrani mused.

"As it happens, the Blessed Artificer has already requested an audience to lodge a complaint under the Terms," Adjutant gravelled, pleased.

Something about that had me begin tapping the side of the blade against my knuckles, the coolness of the silver against my skin grounding me.

"It's bullshit," Indrani flatly said. "She was pushing Zeze, not the other way around. I don't think she meant to actually blind him – she looked surprised by how harsh his reaction was – but she was definitely trying something."

"What he means is that we should now consider ourselves watched at all times," I said without opening my eyes, "and that an audience *she* requested is a reason to meet in private with her not even the heroes can grumble about."

As it happens, Hakram had said. That was what had raised my hackles. It'd happened and it'd happened in a fight where coincidence was nothing more the flimsiest of the lies at play. A story had been offered up to us: Adjutant, Archer and the Black Queen met with the Blessed Artificer. It was the only the first step, though, the air of the tune. Through guile and reason those three would reveal the machinations hidden in the shadows of the Arsenal, to prevent madness from seizing the halls and keep the peace. It was a pretty story, true, and for more than a few Named it'd be a serviceable horse to ride. For *us*, though? I was a warlord, a killer and maker of pacts. Adjutant was my right hand and guardian, Archer was my blade and my eyes. It was a good horse but one for which we'd make poor riders, which made it a shit horse in every way that mattered. After all, no matter how good the horse if an ass was riding it'd still lose the race. We'd been offered that hook so we might bite it and be reeled in to our defeat.

Another angle was required here. The villains? There were four among them that were Arsenal regulars: Masego, the Hunted Magician, the Sinister Physician and, if Indrani was correct, the

Concocter. I was inclined to believe her, given that they'd known each other back in Refuge when they'd been pupils of the Lady of the Lake. But no, it was still the same story from a different angle. We'd shake the tree until truths came tumbling out, and they would. I was not so naïve as to assume that if some plot was afoot there would not be at least one of mine involved. The Hunted Magician himself was not exempt from the suspicion for having brought this to me in the first place, for though I doubted he had the skill or know-how to hook me onto a losing story that did not mean he was not the tool of someone who *was*. Trouble was, we only had so much to go on here and following any of those threads would take us back to the end I was trying to avoid it.

"It's a shit horse," I muttered. "But it's the only one we've got, isn't it?"

Ah, but that was my mistake. I was trying to win according to the rules when I should be trying to win despite them. If you were forced to run a race you could only lose, then the only way to win was to *cheat*. I opened my eyes and found both Hakram and Indrani were watching me in silence. Waiting, knowing from experience that if I'd emerged from inside my head it was with an idea.

"This is a story," I repeated, and smiled.

I twirled the knife across my knuckles, enjoying the blur of silver and movement that danced according to my will.

"And we might not know how it goes, not exactly, but we know the *shape* of it," I mused.

We three curious souls would learn things from our first step that only caused more questions, struggle and search and perhaps even tangle with a mysterious or misguided opponent. It'd go downhill from there, though, but when it all seemed like it was going to fall apart we'd get a moment of revelation from an unlikely source that flipped it all upside down and allowed us to turn it around at the last moment. *We* wouldn't, of course, because we were not the heroes of his story. I was likely to be executing the Red Axe before long, so it'd be like a chicken trying to fly in a sparrow's tracks if I tried to act like I had the right to that sort of providence.

"The thing about providence, though, is that once you understand how it works you can predict it," I told them with a smile. "It can't do something out of nothing, and it uses the most appropriate tool for the job."

And of the ten Arsenal regulars, who was it that was the best fit for a revelation at the edge of disaster? I caught the knife and

flicked it down, smiling when it bit into the table with a satisfyingly sharp *thunk*.

"We're going to speak to the Doddering Sage," I said. "To see if going backwards from the revelation allows us to quicken the pace."

Disaster was on the horizon, I thought, I was in over my head and even the trusted companions at my side might not be enough to get us through this unscathed. And still, as I hummed the first few notes to the old rebel song *The Fox In the Woods*, I found myself smiling.

Gods, but it was good to be home.

Chapter 16: Divine

"Biting the hand that feeds you is another way to feed."
– Dread Emperor Vindictive II

There were seventeen different repositories of books in the Arsenal.

It was a frankly absurd amount and that number didn't even account the private collections some scholars, priests, mages and sundry Named had brought with them. The amount of knowledge held within these walls could be staggering to think about. There were a few places on Calernia where there might be greater collections, like the Tower in Ater or the House of Ink and Parchment in Delos, but those were fewer than five and even those would not draw from so many places and scholarly traditions as the Arsenal had. Several of the libraries were restricted to individuals assigned to official Grand Alliance projects and some held knowledge dangerous enough only a handful of people would ever be allowed to enter them, but we were not headed into the depths of this maze of a hidden fortress: the miscellaneous stacks were, in fact, a repository even guards had access to.

"People around here call them the Stacks of This and That," Archer told me.

She'd fallen into to my right and Adjutant to my left as the three of us abandoned the eating hall and headed towards where the Doddering Sage was most likely to be at this hour.

"So it's the dumping grounds for everything that doesn't fit into another repository," I said.

And wasn't either potentially useful or dangerous, I didn't add. Those books our people were most careful about leaving lying around.

"Might have started out this way, but it's a different beast now," Archer said. "It's one of the largest rooms in the Arsenal and it's filled with little alcoves. Now there's half a hundred little secret nooks where people can sit with a cup of something, hide for a secret talk or a fuck or even just a quiet nap."

"Wouldn't the custodians put an end to that?" I said, eyebrow cocked.

While I found it oddly charming that even in a place as alien as the Arsenal people were finding ways to claw back a piece of normality from the world, at the end of the day the stacks had an actual purpose.

"I expect there aren't enough of them to make a proper attempt," Adjutant said. "There's been two written requests to increase the people assigned to these stacks, since they frequently get their people temporarily poached for other work."

I'd probably seen one of those requests and simply put it out of my mind within moments of reading it, I silently admitted to myself. Throwing more coin and people at something like the miscellaneous stacks wouldn't have even warranted a second look when there were only so many of either those to go around and so many more important matters requiring them.

"It doesn't seem to be causing trouble," I finally said.

I was willing to let sleeping dogs lie, if the only consequence of letting this go on was the existence a few discreet places for people to wind down. Gods knew even Hasenbach's financial wizardry had its limits, and I wasn't going to be sending more coin this way if I could avoid it. The Arsenal cost near as much as one of the war fronts to maintain, which was a damned burden on the treasury even if it was a necessary one. The three of us kept a brisk pace as we passed through the central nest of winding hallways that was the Knot, the occasional pack of scholars in coloured robes falling silent as we passed by. A few recognized Indrani and greeted her, either through actual greetings or hastily taking a turn leading away from her, but to my amusement Hakram drew the eye more than I. I wasn't wearing the Mantle of Woe and my face was not well-known here, while he was a towering orc in attention-catching blackened plate.

We headed down through a set of broad stairs towards the part of the Arsenal known as the Stump. Named for its stout build, low ceilings and the fact that it was where the leftovers of more important places ended up, it reminded me of the old Proceran keeps sometimes found up north. Except the stone here was new and utterly bare, like it'd been conjured up out of thin air, and there was a... scent in the air. Almost like metal, but not quite. It was everywhere in the Arsenal, I thought, but stronger here than anywhere else. It smelled of work done through sorcery, and

the taste of it had seeped into every breath I took. We took a right on a crossroads where the other path would have, as the carving on the wall indicated, led us to the Repository.

"You've met the Doddering Sage before," I said, breaking the silence.

I glanced at Archer and found the trace of a frown on her brow.

"Met is a strong word," Indrani shrugged. "It wasn't one of his good days."

"He grows... confused, as I understand it," I said.

"He's an interesting fellow," she replied, "but his conversation loops back around after a bit. He does not realize. Sharp, though, when he's there. Or so Zeze says, anyway. He must have been quite something in his prime."

Or he was a skilled liar and thought it in his interest for others to believe him as past said prime, I thought. Though Indrani could be frightfully perceptive at times, she was not flawless in her judgements. None of us were.

"Anything I should worry of?" I asked.

She considered that for a moment.

"I can't place his accent," Indrani said. "More like he doesn't have one, and he speaks at least four languages."

Maybe not Proceran, then. Most Named tended to be polyglots, but in that regard both heroes and villains from the Principate tended to be lacking. It wasn't a reflection of any inherent inferiority but rather of the fact that most of them tended to be regional and might genuinely never meet someone who didn't speak their native tongue throughout their entire life. Then again the old man *was* a sage, even if a doddering one, and that implied a certain knack for the scholarly. Something to keep in mind, anyway. A walk down a stunted little corridor brought us to broad open doors, and a carving in the wall spelling out Miscellaneous Works Repository in three languages: Chantant, Lower Miezian and Ceseo. There was a bureau buried under an avalanche of books just past the doors, and a harried-looking young man behind it who was frowning at an open volume by magelight. Someone had written *department of this and that* in chalk on the side, as well as the even cheekier *ring if you need a custodian, we would like one as well* I noted with a suppressed smile. We entered and as Archer took the initiative to go speak to the young man I took a moment to study our surroundings.

After the description of this being dumping grounds for every other library, I'd expected some sort of rampant chaos with but

it wasn't anything like that. The magelight globes hanging from the low ceiling shone instead down on cramped but neat paths of shelves filled to the brim with books of all shapes and sizes, Chalk slates haphazardly distributing revealing some arcane library reference symbols and broad themes to swaths of the collection to which I saw no rhyme nor reason: *history of fish*, *probably untrue* sat side by side with *Arlesite romance* and both were across an entire stack filled with *travel journal*, *but metaphorical*. There was not a single lit flame within here, but magelights in glass globes had been tied to tongs of leather in a way that made it so they could both be worn and used as a handheld lantern. The impressive part, though, was the size of this place.

It was larger than the throne room in Laure, at the very least, and every spare inch seemed to be used by either stacks or wagon-sized wicker baskets filled with books not yet classed. *I could hide an entire company of legionaries in here*, I thought, *and not a soul would notice until the goblins got bored*. While I'd been lost in my contemplations, Archer had apparently gotten what she needed from the young man at the bureau – who was now, I noticed, staring at me with fear and awe while trying very hard to pretend he'd gone back to reading his book. I winked at him, then turned to Indrani.

"So?" I asked.

"He's in there," Archer said. "Though Gods only know where. Last sighting was apparently near the 'fluorescent, neither flora nor fauna' stacks."

"Stacks," I repeated. "As in, we have *multiple* of those?"

"It's important to look on the bright side of life, Catherine," Indrani grinned at me, then winked. "You know, 'cause fluorescent means-"

"You are the worst person I know," I informed her in disgust.

Ugh, puns. At least when the sappers made one of those, something usually exploded not long after. That was as close as redeeming such atrocity against the laws of Gods and men could be had. It was a true shame the Sisters weren't willing to allow that in the holy book, but I'd just have to keep suggesting it. Maybe some sort of appendix, I mused.

"But I don't expect we'll have too hard a time finding him," I continued, "will we, Adjutant?"

"That's about as clever as her pun," Hakram told me. "You just didn't wink afterwards, so it was less glaringly terrible."

We both ignored Indrani's outraged noises.

"Everybody's a fucking critic these days," I muttered. "*Fine*. My lord Adjutant, kindly use your aspect to *search* for the Doddering Sage until we have *obtained his presence*."

"Well, since you asked so nicely," Adjutant gravelled, sounding amused.

I found I was swallowing a grin. Gods, how was it that I'd missed those assholes so much? Without any more need for verbally jostling, Adjutant called on one of three crystallized manifestations of his Name. **Find** was Adjutant's most subtle aspect, and in truth one of the most nuanced I'd ever heard of: much like with Hakram himself, the apparent simplicity hid remarkable depth. While it could be used to significantly accelerate searched for anything material, whether living or not, it had more abstract uses as well. They tied into the way the aspect itself functioned, in my opinion. For example, after we hit the first crossroads Hakram closed his eyes and called on his aspect again before taking a swift left. This was not the act of finding information from a book where we knew it was or picking out a woman from a crowd: he was, in effect, going on nothing. And still he'd get us to the Doddering Sage, I had no worry whatsoever about that.

Masego had theorized – and Akua seemed to think it a reasonable inference – that what Adjutant was doing was a phenomenon known among diabolists as *tapering*. It was apparently common among the most intelligent of devils, when they grew ancient enough. It was an inherently inhuman degree of perception born from the fact that such devils could notice and remember ever detail in a way that humans could not and call on a sheer amount of experience physically unattainable by mortals. It allowed those creatures to adapt to wildly different surroundings, people and situations with seeming flawlessness by taking in everything around them and then refining the possibilities to what was the most likely truth. Tapering the noise until all that was left was the true tune. It was why an incubus could take over a Praesi seraglio just as easily as it could break apart a Stygian line-match.

The devil had a degree of perception that could not be matched by humans, and it was helped along by decades if not centuries of learning about the ins and outs of human nature. It was the opinion of those two that Hakram's aspect essentially allowed him to tap into a similar state for a small amount of time.

Vivienne, on the other hand, had noted she'd seen similar behaviour from the Bumbling Conjuror: providence's golden son, whose every debacle turned out to be a masterstroke until he ran into a villain so far beyond him providence was buried along with him. I was actually inclined to side with her on this. To my eye, **Find** looked a lot like discount providence put together for one of Below's: luck put together from the possible, but only ever a

story's sort of luck. It could get us closer to what we needed, or what was already within our grasp, but it was not a panacea for all our ills and relying on it for answers was putting our lives into the hands of fickle, fickle luck. Regardless of who had the truth of it, though, in practice Adjutant guided us through twists and turns until we were deep within the maze.

Twice we passed hidden nooks, one occupied by a snoring priest on an armchair and the other by an impressive collection of bottles from I confiscated what looked like genuine Harrow brandy in the name of the throne of Callow, until Hakram's steps slowed. I cocked my head to the side, taking a whiff of the air. Was that what I thought it was? Huh. I took the lead in turning the corner, stumbling onto my first sight of the Doddering Sage. The old man looked haggard, I thought, taking in the rumpled grey robes and ratty cloth shoes, but somehow there was a sense of power to it. A mane of shoulder-length grey hair mixed with what would have been a long and luxurious beard, were it not unkempt. The Doddering Sage licked wet red lips and narrowed his amber brown eyes as he caught sight of me in turn, leaning back into a ratty brown armchair. In his hands was the source of the smell I'd caught: a polished little wooden pipe filled with freshly-lit wakeleaf.

"It's not for you, Constance," the Doddering Sage told me. "You're much too young, and this is a fool's vice besides."

"*Shit*," Archer muttered. "Not a good day."

I stepped forward, ignoring the comment, and came to lean against the stacks at his side.

"Tell me about it," I sighed, reached for the pipe I carried in my tunic. "I get headaches if I don't smoke at least once, nowadays."

The Doddering Sage watched me produce a small packet of my own wakeleaf – Hanno's gift, still with me – and stuff my own pipe before passing a palm over it to light it with a touch of black flame.

"Dragonbone," the old man said, eyes narrowing further. "Expensive. Rare. *Dangerous*. You are not Constance."

I breathed in, swallowing the smoke and spat it back out.

"I'm not," I said. "I'm the Black Queen, and you have answers for me."

"Do I?" the Doddering Sage said. "How good of me."

He brusquely snorted, then pulled at his own pipe. I could only watch in envy as he blew a smoke ring, then further showed off by blowing a smaller ring into it.

"Damn, but that *is* impressive," I admitted.

"I have a few years of practice on you, Foundling Queen," the old man smiled, face wreathed in the last wisps of his smoke. "You come to me for my eyes, I take it."

"Do I?" I asked.

When completely out of my depth, I was in no way above smiling meaningfully and saying something mildly cryptic. A truly ridiculous amount of people were almost *eager* to fall for that.

"That boy of yours, the one with the deadly earnestness, he'll be a terror one day," the Sage said, "but he's a few years short still. That's why an old sack of bones like me are brought in even when there are all these swaggering youths. I can look, yes I can. But you'll not hurt Constance, will you? Promise me."

His lip trembled in sudden emotion, and something in me clenched. He looked fragile, in that moment, though the truth of his fragility was hidden from him. Pity welled up, but I pushed it down. *You could be playing me*, I thought. *And so I'll offer kindness where I can, but never without keeping a knife in hand.*

"I won't," I said. "I promise."

"Good," he muttered. "Good. You do remind me of him, you know. Robert. He was kind, but he was not *soft*."

I said nothing, for there was nothing to say.

"**Perceive**," the Doddering Sage said, and Creation shivered.

I watched him, and saw his eyes had turned pure white – he looked blind, but only a fool would have made that mistake. I felt something skittering across my soul, like a spider against glass, and the old man exhaled.

"Twinned," he said. "Incipient. You make your own Role, and the Name walks hand in hand with another. I cannot see them, there is... refusal."

I shivered, fingers clenching around my pipe, and did not believe this for a moment to be the mad ramblings of an old man. Not when my very soul was shivering along with the rest of me, lost and reaching. The Doddering Sage turned towards me abruptly, so quick I thought his head might snap.

"More?" he said, sounding surprised. "You... *how*? It isn't yours, where did you take it?"

"What?" I said, leaning forward. "What did I take?"

"A rival?" he muttered. "A thief? A *successor*? You keep stories within you that neither your ear nor eye ever knew. Shapes and beats and the sound of the knife kissing flesh."

My pipe tumbled across the floor, though I did not remember dropping it – or catching the Sage's robes, fists tightening around them as I pulled him closer.

"Focus," I ordered, voice ringing with power. "The stories, where do they come from?"

My hand was shaking, and the answer was on the tip of my tongue. I knew this, I'd had it since/

/and my eyes were blinking. I pushed down the surge of rage that seize hold of me at the way I just couldn't seem to remember what I wanted. I would be mistress of my own mind, even if I had to rip out the parts that misbehaved.

"Sage," I said, "*tell me.*"

"Reflection," he whispered, sounding awed. "No, an echo. You stole from her echo, and now it's in your head. How did you not break?"

I released his robes, stumbling back. *Oh. Oh.* And at last I remembered, what it was that Masego and I had done in the depths of Arcadia, when we'd harvested the echoes left behind by things that would become gods. He'd learned dark secrets from that, deep magics. And I had/ *no you fucking don't, it's my mind and I there is only one ruler here.* I wrenched the world back from the blankness, wrestled it back into submission. I was kneeling, gasping, and Adjutant's worried hand was on my shoulder. But it didn't matter, even as I convulsed and threw up at the feet of the Doddering Sage.

"Cat," Hakram quietly asked, "can you hear me?"

"Yes," I laughed. "Yes, I can hear you. And I remember now, what it is I got from the Intercessor."

The shape of a thousand stories, the tune of the song if not the words. An instinct, one that'd sharpened something already existing into a blade capable of upending old monsters and empires. I wiped my mouth and an apology to the Sage was halfway to my lips when I realized his eyes were closed and he was, seemingly, sleeping. Unearthing what had been waiting in the back of my head had knocked him out, looked like. I rose to my feet, slowly, and allowed Hakram to tuck my cleaned pipe back into my tunic as I leaned against his arm.

"Catherine," Indrani quietly said, "what the Hells was that?"

"I forced myself to remember something my mind didn't know how to cope with," I said. "But it was worth it. I know what's in the back of my head, and now that I know it can't be used against me."

The Augur had told us that the Bard saw in stories, saw all the stories, and that when dealing with Named she was nigh untouchable. But she could be beaten, because the more we knew of her the less power she held over us. And one of these days I would find a set of shackles even her smug immortal ass couldn't slither her way out of. The first step to that was realizing I'd stolen part of her and made it my own: that was on less surprise for her to pull on me when the time came. With surprising gentleness, Indrani reached out and took my face in hand. She withdrew after touching under my nose, fingers coming away flecked with blood.

"Don't think too hard, Cat," she said, sounding worried. "You're not made of Winter anymore: some things you won't get back up from."

"The more I bleed now," I replied, "the less I'll bleed when the knives really come out."

Still, I winced as I wiped away the blood beneath my nostrils. I had the most horrible headache. A glance at the Doddering Sage told me he was still out, so there'd be no more to learn here.

"Find out who the Constance he was talking about is," I quietly told Hakram. "If she's still alive, see to it she doesn't want for anything. If she's not, see to her descendants."

I owed the man, for this, and I'd pay my debt in full. He'd have a warm place to stay in after the war, be it in Callow or at Cardinal. That much I could repay, for what I'd learned today and what it had cost him to tell me.

"I'll see to it," Adjutant promised.

"I hate to be that girl," Archer said, "but we're in the shit now, aren't we? You said we were here for a revelation, but there wasn't anything about this that helps us figure out what's going on here."

I pushed off of Hakram and took my staff from the stacks where I'd left it propped up against, rolling my shoulder to loosen it. She wasn't wrong about that, though she wasn't exactly right either. I found the bottle of Harrow brandy I'd liberated from oppression earlier pressed into my hand, uncorked, and Indrani gave me a steady look.

"Your breath still smells like, you know," she told me, not unkindly.

Ah. That. Fair enough. I took a long swallow from the bottle, then another until the taste of vomit was quite gone and a pleasant warmth was beginning to settle into my belly.

"Good stuff," I muttered, passing it back. "Right, so us being the shit. True enough, 'Drani, but he actually told us exactly what we needed to know before we dipped into my little... gift."

"He told us things about your Name," Archer skeptically said. "Which I've been curious about, true, but it doesn't get us out of this mess."

"Sure it does," I said, "if you consider that, should we have followed the story as it was offered to us, we'd be learning this *quite* late. This is our revelation, Archer. We can go back from it."

Hakram cleared his throat.

"You're doing that thing again," he told me, "where you talk to yourself in your head and then expect us to keep up."

"You usually do, though," I muttered. "Fine, hear me out then. The three of us are bold investigators for truth and justice—"

"Hungering Gods," Hakram swore under his breath.

"Yes," Indrani jeered, "and let them kneel before us, begging abjectly for mercy we will always deny!"

"I'm not going to touch that," I decided, "so, by going down that road we bite into a story. One that got set out for us to bite because we're a bad fit for it, so we'll fail."

"And we are a bad fit for it, because?" Hakram asked.

"Indrani," I said, "how many people have you killed this year?"

The ochre-skinned Named hummed.

"Define people," she finally asked.

"Because that," I told him.

"So we are avoiding this story," Adjutant said.

"No," I said, "if I had something else to slap down instead I might, mind you, but I've got nothing. But that doesn't mean we can't cheat. The thing is, Hakram, that is a functional story. If we were a band of heroes, we could ride it to the finish."

"Now you're just making it too easy," Indrani reproached.

"For the trap to work," Adjutant slowly said, "the story has to be... functional for lack of a better term. It is simply us who would not function with it."

"Yeah," I said, "which is why we went directly for the Doddering Sage. He was my guess for the guy who, when it looks like we're about to lose for good, reveals a truth to us and allows us to turn it all around."

"As heroes are wont to," the orc nodded.

"Hate to break it to you, Cat, but he didn't say shit about conspiracies," Archer pointed out.

"Yes," I agreed. "He talked, instead, about my Name. Which means someone's trying to fuck with my Name, or maybe the one 'twinned' to it."

A poetic way to talk about a nemesis, but it fit. For every villain with Destroy, there was a hero with Protect. That was the way the Game of the Gods was played, and I'd be no exception. I cleared my throat.

"Without sounding arrogant-"

"That'd be a first," Indrani mused.

I flipped her off.

"- at least part of this is meant as a swing at me as well as a broader attack on the Truce and Terms," I said. "And that rather narrows down who it is we might be fighting against."

"If you cannot name the swordsman, name the sword," Archer snorted. "Fair. Only so many people who'd come swinging at you this way. So we're in a scrap with the Wandering Bard, are we?"

"She's come out of the woodworks at last," I grunted in agreement. "And she took her sweet time before she did, 'Drani, so this isn't going to be some sloppy half-baked attempt. She's come for blood, and at the moment she's *winning*."

"The Truce and the Terms are holding," Adjutant said. "And you have learned valuable information."

Yeah, I had. Which I would have taken for a victory, if I'd not just learned that part of the instincts that'd driven me to this decision had been ripped out of the old monster I was now facing. Which meant I was about to get taken for a ride, because she'd known about that and until now I hadn't.

"The Sage is unconscious," Archer suddenly said.

"But obviously alive, and not a hero besides," Hakram said. "If stirring conflict is the purpose, that is a weak hand."

"Shut up," I said, "both of you. Use your Name."

I called on Night instead, sharpening my senses to the very limit of what I could bear, and that was when I heard it: hissing sounds. Like a gas being released. At least ten, probably more.

"There is something in the air," Adjutant growled.

"And I don't hear anyone out there moving," Archer said.

Was everyone else out there dead? It might simply be a curse or a deep sleep instead, I mused, though death would likely be easier to arrange. I could not afford to take a moment and ponder how many innocents had likely just been snuffed out as part of a scheme, not when there were more lives on the line, so I tucked that away cleanly.

"The Concocter would be capable of making a brew that can do this," I said.

"I've known her to work with gases, sometimes," Indrani hesitantly agreed. "But she wouldn't, Cat."

"It doesn't need to be her plan," I murmured, "just her work. It being used will be quite enough, when heroes stumble into this."

Because that'd be the logical move, wouldn't it? If someone was trying to start a fight between Named in the Arsenal, what better way to have a pack of heroes stumble unto me and two of the Woe surrounded by corpses and an unconscious Named. Hells, it was going to be the Mirror Knight and his band wasn't it? That was the reason that little fucker was here at all: so that the Intercessor would have someone capable of rallying the heroic side of the Arsenal but having no interest in talking this out with me instead of drawing a sword. Any moment now he and the worst possible combination of Named the Bard could muster were going to come in, and I needed to think how I could wiggle out of this mess. The moment the Mirror Knight and the Black Queen came face to face, I decided, this was no longer recoverable. It'd become a conflict between the two of us, and people would have to take sides: even if I won and showed restraint, there was a decent chance the Truce and Terms would collapse in the aftermath of this debacle.

I needed someone to distract the Named coming, and then I needed to start tugging at the other threads of this story until it all came tumbling down and the Intercessor had nothing left to work with.

"People just came in," Archer murmured, then paused as she pricked her ear. "Five, two in armour."

"Hakram," I said, "I need you to do something for me."

The orc looked at me, then sharply nodded.

"It was my plot," he agreed. "Will you have already arrested me, or are we fighting?"

I clenched my fist, then slugged him in the side of the face.

"The day I throw any of you under the wheels like that is the day I slit my own throat," I hissed. "You, Adjutant, are investigating this on the behalf of the Black Queen. You're going to them for help, because you caught sight of two people running. Do what you can from the inside."

He took a step back, staggered more by the words than the hit.

"Archer and I are going to make a run for it," I said. "Make it look good."

If the Intercessor wanted to make me the villain of this fucking story, then she ought to have been more careful what she wished for.

Chapter 17: Felonious

"Crimes against a crown are treason, crimes by a crown are a reign."

– Dread Emperor Reprobate the First

And then we were two.

Part of me might have been more comfortable keeping Adjutant at my side instead of Archer, but it'd be a mistake: she was the one who knew her way around this place and the Named within it.

"We need to make an escape," I said.

"Like we used to say in Refuge," Indrani cheerfully told me, "the best kind of invisibility is killing all the witnesses."

She was probably messing with me, but then that *did* sound like something Ranger might say.

"We can't kill anyone," I told her.

"That sounds like a terrible plan," Archer complained.

"But we're probably going to have to fight," I frankly added.

"I never doubted you for a moment," she assured me.

This was hauntingly familiar, I mused, although we weren't in a tunnel surrounded by dead drow with the entire invading army of the Kingdom Under behind us. We must have been skulking through the labyrinthine stacks for almost eighty heartbeats now, but I kept us going what I – probably mistakenly – believed to be west. It was, at the very least, vaguely leftwards.

"The thing is," I said, "neither the Black Queen nor the Archer can fight any of these fine heroes coming to foil the plots afoot."

If the Mirror Knight saw me flee a room filled with dead bodies while leaving an unconscious old man Named behind then there really would be no talking him into the possibility that might not, in fact, trying to undo my own life's work and doom Calernia because of my inherent dastardliness. *Fucking heroes*, I uncharitably thought.

"I get it," Indrani said, with enthusiasm that surprised me. "So we, like, put on masks and we're these mysterious villainesses of cryptic intent. I will be the Peerless Beauty, whose legendary good looks eclipse the sun itself-"

"So we're going to pretend we're dead bodies," I interrupted with great relish.

See, when I'd known Archer for only a few months I might have been tempted to chide her for joking around when this was a rather deadly situation, all things considered, and one that could have drastic consequences for the entire continent. Except that now I knew her well enough to know that, while she did very much enjoy being mocking even rapidly approaching doom, she did these kinds of things for a reason. The back and forth was calming me, I was not above admitting, and back when I'd been made of smoke and mirrors it'd been one of the few things that had me feeling human for a bit. I knew this, she knew I knew this, and I doubted either of us would ever admit it out loud. That did not mean in the slightest that I did not *thoroughly* enjoy shutting every door on her metaphorical fingers that I could.

"Cat," she said, sounding betrayed.

"Revenants, to be exact," I blithely continued. "My glamour hasn't gotten all that better since it stopped being that and became Night instead, but it should still fool anyone without eyes out of the ordinary."

"Which they'll have," Archer noted.

We tread around the messy pile of books left by a shelf that'd collapsed, and I grunted in agreement. This would be the Mirror Knight's band, and with the amount of heroes there were in this place he'd be able to draw the most useful talents from a rather large lineup he was even halfway clever. And even if he *wasn't*, he should still end up with at least one hero of extraordinary perception: mages and mystics tended to have a trick or two to see to that, given the nature of the threats and villains they were born to face.

"Which is why I'll need you to take them out of the fight before they can catch on," I said. "We'll be springing an ambush."

"We're good, but not *that* good," Archer said. "Not if we're staying quiet."

"If we're taking a swing at a band of five on war footing, maybe even with Hakram backing them up, then no we're not," I replied. "So we're not going to do that."

Indrani peered at me for a moment, then smugly smirked.

"We're going to set something on fire, aren't we?"

I coughed.

"It's not the only thing we're going to do," I defended. "It's just, you know, a part-"

"A part that is on fire," Archer sagely continued. "A fire hat you set. You monster."

"Hey," I weakly replied. "I wouldn't keep using it if didn't work all the time. It's not like I have a preference for it, it's just that so many things out there are flammable."

"Inflammable," Indrani haughtily corrected.

"Fuck off," I retorted, "Akua already pulled this bit on me, flammable is right."

"You're taking language lessons from a ghost, and *I'm* the dubious one?" she replied without missing a beat.

Even as the latest bit of back and forth was spoken, we reached what I was fairly sure to be the western wall of the Miscellaneous Stacks. We weren't quite at the back of the great room, but we ought to be pretty deep in by my understanding. And far enough from the Doddering Sage that he shouldn't be at risk of being hurt before one of the heroes rescued him – and he wouldn't be forgotten about, either, not with Hakram joining them. The Mirror Knight was actually the reason I considered setting a fire here to be a valid tactic when I did not yet know if the gas that'd been released had killed the custodians or

simply put them asleep. A more... nuanced Named might have been tempted to make the hard decision of sacrificing the people for the chase, but though Christophe was a stubborn ass with half the wits one of those should have, that was simply not his nature. He did not seem himself as someone who'd make that choice, so he wouldn't, and as the leader of his band he'd give the order to start with a rescue. Sure as providence, we'd probably run into one or more of the heroes and whoever had good eyes was near certain to be of that lot.

But it wouldn't be a band of five, which meant Archer and I would have a lot more leeway to deal with them without tipping our hands.

"Fresh faces first," I said, slowing to a stop.

"Revenants, huh," Indrani mused. "So you want to slap the Dead King's name on this?"

"They won't necessarily buy that," I noted, "but at this point I'm not trying to convince them of something so much as trying to convince them they *don't* know anything."

"Lies and violence," Archer fondly said.

At least there wasn't anyone there to here, I grudgingly thought. One of these days, though, she'd say that in front of some chronicler and it'd be written down and it would all be downhill from there. If those ended up being taken as the words of House Foundling, I was going to drown her in a vat of ink.

"For you I'm thinking the Black Sickle," I said. "Word is Tariq torched his ass good a few months back after catching him sneaking around near Sommont, but he was never actually confirmed destroyed."

And the Revenant in question had, while being somewhat taller than Indrani from what I could remember, used a pair of eerie dark sickles as his weapons of choice. That much I couldn't replicate but while Archer didn't have her bow and even if she did using it would be a dead giveaway, she'd most definitely have knives.

"Do you have any other blades than your-" I started, before closing my mouth.

Of course she did, she was Archer. She had enough blades on her that half the time I got her undressed her actual clothes made as much noise hitting the floor as her mail.

"Stupid question," I finished, "I withdraw it. Just don't use the longknives."

They were not her signature and odds were none of the Mirror Knight's band would have ever seen Archer fight regardless, but it was a risk when Indrani had brought her band into the Arsenal: *those* knew her arms well, and half of them were heroes. I cast her a searching look, wondering what best to anchor the working on.

"You mind if I use your scarf for this?" I asked.

"Don't," she said. "The coat would do, right?"

Considering she wasn't wearing her mail at the moment it was the part of her most likely to be hit – and I couldn't be sure a good enough hit with Light wouldn't break my illusion – but that scarf was one of the material possessions she cared about so I didn't insist.

"Belt would be better," I said, shaking my head.

She conceded with a nod. As for my face, I did actually have an idea that had the potential to get Christophe running in the wrong direction with a great deal of certainty.

"You've seen the Wicked Enchanter, right?" I asked.

"Alive?" Indrani replied. "No. But I did get a good look at his still-warm corpse."

"That might be even better, actually," I mused. "Mind letting me have a look at the memory?"

"Go ahead," she shrugged, leaning forward.

I put a hand against her temple and reached for the Night, letting it flow through me and ever so gently into her. I closed my eyes, sunk into the darkness.

"Think of it," I softly asked.

A moment later she did, with vivid sharpness, and I saw what she saw. The Enchanter had looked rather young, to my surprise. Perhaps in his mid-twenties, though for a villain such appearances didn't necessarily speak much to the truth of their age. Tanned, dark-haired, athletically fit and actually rather handsome he was not the emaciated and sinister figure I'd somehow imagined he would be. But upon closer look, his handsomeness was a little *too* neat. Too symmetrical, and somewhat unnatural for it. Not unlike the Exiled Prince's had been, all those years go. *Name vanity*, I thought with disdain. The gruesome axe wound that'd split him open from the bottom left of his neck to his belly button had spilled blood and guts all over what looked like it might have been a nicely-tailored set of green tunic and

trousers with silver linings, the kind of thing a minor Proceran highborn or a wealthy merchant would wear more than a villain.

"Did he use any tools?" I quietly pressed.

An intricate casting rod appeared in my mind, stained with blood and bitten into by a blade. To my distaste, it appeared to have been sculpted in longer homage to the ceremonial baton that Cordelia Hasenbach used on some formal occasions. Her was sculpted as a bundle of twigs tied together by a string, though, while the Wicked Enchanter's casting rod was instead a knot of snakes eating each other and encircled by chains. I remembered when he'd been brought into the Terms, I'd read the report, and it had mentioned that he was middling conjurer but skilled in 'domination magics'. From the beginning he'd been noted as a potential problem, though also as being something of a coward and so unlikely to misbehave if kept an eye on.

"Thanks," I said, withdrawing the Night back into me.

Keeping the image firmly in mind, I laid a hand against my belt and felt the cool touch of Night wash over my skin. I reached again and tightened my fingers around my staff – which would give away my identity in moments, if it kept looking like itself – but the Night struggled to sink in.

"None of that, now," I muttered. "I did not snatch you from that tree so I'd get mouthed off to."

As if reluctantly, somehow giving off the impression of ill-grace, the resistance ceased and I was left to hold the illusion of the dead villain's casting rod. It wasn't an exact fit, as my staff had been longer, but it'd serve. I wasted no time in laying a hand on Indrani's belt, ignoring the suggestive eyebrow-wagging it earned me. Night seeped into the leather, and as I watched Archer was replaced by a slender figure in ragged robes and a hood that revealed only dark skin and a mouth sown shut. Her knives I didn't change, since it'd frankly be more trouble than it was worth to try and make them look like sickles. I exhaled and gathered Night into me once more time, as I could no longer afford delays: the moment I'd begun using Night, I would have tipped off the heroes as to our presence. I traced a finger against the wood stacks closest to me, leaving behind a trail of flame – natural, not of Night. Blackflame would be a dead giveaway, but it also meant I couldn't outright throw fire around. I dipped a thick leather-bound book into the growing flames and tossed it at Archer, who caught it without missing a beat.

"Spread it around some," I ordered. "We need a proper blaze."

"Gotcha," she nodded, then cocked her head to the side. "And after?"

"Hit and run," I said. "I trust you to set up your ambush."

"I'll see what I can do," she said, airily waving my words away.

She didn't fool me even a little: Indrani was a little pleased as the spoken acknowledgement of something we'd both known to be true, and not putting all that much of an effort into hiding it. It *had* been some time since we last fought side by side, I mused, that was true. But her duties would have kept her sharp and working with her on the field had always come easy. I saw no reason why that should have changed in the last two years.

"Don't keep me waiting," I smiled, waving her off.

She was gone in a moment, silent as a ghost, and I sighed as I cast a look at the fire springing up to my side. Burning books, damn me: I might as well be burning silver, miscellaneous stacks or not. Still I picked up a heavy tome from the opposite stack and fed it to the flames long enough for it to catch before putting some spring to my step. It'd be quicker with Night, but it'd also risk giving away where I currently was. Another three sources on top of what Archer cooked up ought to do the trick without putting anyone in too much danger, I mused. By the time I'd gone down another two shelves and started a fresh blaze on the other side, a shout of dismay in the distance told me the game was properly afoot.

"Now," I muttered as I hastened my steps and started another fire, "you split up."

Hakram ought to have run into them by now, and if that'd ended up in brawl, I would have heard it. Which meant that in the best case they would be tacitly accepting him as an ally, and in the worst they'd be considering him an enemy best brought with them to keep an eye until he could be counted on to cackle and reveal the depths his perfidy in a surprisingly informative speech. I'd considered villains who actually indulged in monologues to be complete idiots, when I started out, and my father had encouraged that perception. Not without reason. I had a lot more sympathy for villains who indulged now that I'd spent a few years around heroes, though. Some days you just wanted to rub their *utter fucking idiocy* in their faces, like forcing a dog to look at its vomit.

That, uh, burst of opinion aside, Hakram would be sure to mention the Doddering Sage's presence if it wasn't brought up. That meant at least one of the five, headed straight for the unconscious Named. Adjutant wouldn't go along, since that'd carry the risk of the Sage waking up and recognizing him, so that left a group of five. There should be one, maybe to who took care of the custodians – be they corpses or unconscious, and actually I now that I thought about it I should be able to answer that question right now. Was it worth revealing my position for? Yes, I

decided, absent-mindedly starting another fire as I kept walking forward. If only so that I could more accurately predict how the heroes moved. Sinking into Night, I reached out for the nearest corpse to raise and found nothing that would serve. Good, all alive then. That meant I could definitely count on at least *one* hero going off to save them rather than coming after me, bringing them down to a peak of four. Most likely three, though, I mused. Less likely to have accidental casualties that way. Which meant the real question was whether or not Hakram would be one of the three. Time to draw them in close and find out, I reckoned.

I tossed the book into stacks to my right and kept moving without bothering to check if it'd started another blaze or not. By now, when standing at the right angle between some stacks I could see the smoke from where Archer had started fires of her own. Not the flames themselves, given that the ceiling was low the vision obscure and I might, possibly, not be the tallest person alive. The smoke would serve well enough, though, since it told me where she'd headed. Apparently while I'd been headed in a straight line south, she'd gone south-east and been messy about fostering flame: it didn't give a trajectory to follow, not like I had with my straightforward march down. Now, if the opposition was made of fools they'd follow the burning arrow I was lighting for them and wait for me at the bottom. But they weren't fools, or this war would have killed them by now. Well, they weren't fools in *this* particular way, more like, I mentally corrected.

They'd have to send someone there, but the Mirror Knight would be headed into the burning mess Archer had just made. Which meant it was also where I needed to go. It was possible, in theory, that the person who'd be waiting for me at the end of the line I'd drawn in fire would be Hakram, and so I'd be free to just put him through a few shelves and get out while leaving him plausible deniability. In practice, I was the opposition and facing a band of five so it was the eyes that'd be waiting for me there – but close enough to come quick when the scuffle started elsewhere, just in time to stumble onto the scene and unmask me. That sounded like a bad thing, at first glance, but it wasn't. It meant I could dictate the location, make-up and tempo of that encounter. If I couldn't scrap together a win with that on my side, I might as well just slit my wrists and join up with Keter.

A sharp turn to the right saw me heading towards Archer's devouring blaze with a song stuck in my throat. The smoke and heat were licking at my sides, and still I hummed out the tune and words.

"Run the hounds, rides the hunter

His spear in hand, banner aflutter."

It was an old one, this one, though not so old as *Here They Come Again* or *Red The Flowers*. It'd come later, when the struggle

against Proceran occupation had begun turning in the favour of Callowan partisans – but not yet so much that the cities were in their hands again, and so there'd been a need to be circumspect where princes' men might be listening.

"Charging that way, this one baying

Trampling the paths, again raging."

Before me, a bonfire of wood and parchment roared. Loud enough it was almost deafening, which meant I wouldn't be able to call on my sharpened senses. But neither would the opposition, and I was the one with something to hide. The smoke would help mitigate visibility, and it was something I'd be able to wield to great use, considering the functional goal here was escape and not actually winning the fight. The heat itself was no great trouble to me, though I felt it rather more keenly than I would have with the Mantle of Woe on my back. I picked out, after a moment to consider, exactly where I was to be 'caught' by the heroes. Further in, between two tall racks already touched by flame but not yet consumed. Enough fire and smoke ahead and behind that I would be half-veiled, but not so much that I would choke. One, two, three times did I lay my hand and only then counted myself satisfied.

On a whim, I snatched up a book from the shelves and smiled when I read the title, written in Chantant: *The Life and Lies of Monsieur Montfailli, A Monk No Longer*. Suitably absurd, I decided, for what was about to unfold. One, two, three times did I lay my hand and seed Night, only then counting myself satisfied. I was ready to begin.

They came for me through the smoke, two of them, even as the refrain of the song caught up with me at last.

"But we know, oh we know,

That in the woods, the fox is king

Yes we know, oh we know

That in the woods, the fox is king."

Alistair the Fox was the closest thing to a trickster-king my home had ever had to boast of, though at times he'd been little more than a bold bandit in good armour. The Mirror Knight advanced with his sword already in hand, silver shield up and living up to the Name. He wore no helm, and his hair was pressed close to his brow by sweat. At his side was the Blade of Mercy, whose hand snapped out as soon as he saw me to clasp the handle of his greatsword and slide it out of the leather straps on his back.

"Who are you?" the Mirror Knight snarled. "Why did you do this?"

The book in my hands I snapped shut, turning to face them entirely and watching both their faces pale when they saw the grisly wound that'd killed the Wicked Enchanter. I'd never heard the man speak, of course. Neither had Indrani, so I couldn't even attempt to imitate his voice. But then, it wasn't necessarily the Enchanter himself I was pretending to be, was it? The Dead King I was a passing hand at impersonating, from all those lovely little talks he and I kept having at the edge of the world.

"Late again, Mirror Knight," I said. "Do you not tire of always needing better Chosen to take you by the hand?"

"We'll stop you, monster," the Blade of Mercy said, voice shaking. "I don't know what pact you've made with the Black Queen, but-

Oh, *come on*. Really, now I was conspiring with the damned Dead King to sabotage the same Arsenal I'd shelled out gold to help build? At some point these assholes were going to have to explain to me exactly what my plot was supposed to *be* here.

"- it won't be enough," the Mirror Knight grimly said, sword rising higher. "Powerful you may be, but your vessel was not. Even the King of Death cannot grow the dead."

"With men such as you," I said, tone contemptuous, "why would I *need* to?"

First touch, and it would be the most subtle. Just a palm I'd pressed against the back of the stacks to my left, seeding the slightest bit of Night. And as I gestured my veiled staff, I ripped it right out. There was a crack, which was enough to have the Mirror Knight shooting forward at impressive speed for a man in plate while Light engulfed the Blade of Mercy's weapon. The Night hadn't been much, really the barest of seedlings, but then the wood was already burning and breaking down. It was more than enough. The entire set of shelves collapsed, spewing out debris and burning books in a flood even as the Mirror Knight passed. Wouldn't do anything to actually hurt the man, of course. He was the closest thing the Heavens had been able to rustle up to a fortress on legs. But then his strength came from resistance, not, necessarily physical power, and that meant he was still a human-shaped thing of human weight and subject to the same sort of creational forces that would affect these. The point of breaking the shelves had not been hurting him, it'd been *blinding* him.

I took a single, measured step to the left.

The Mirror Knight burst out of the fire and debris, still under the impression I was right in front of him, but now he was a man

in plate running blindly and very much intent on stabbing me with his sword. If I'd swung at him with even my full power in the Night, I honestly doubted I'd be able to crack that shining shield of his. But that wasn't my game, not here and tonight. The second touch I'd laid was running my fingers across a stretch of about one foot and a half on the ground, against the warm stone, making the oiliest residue of Night that I could. So the Mirror Knight slipped, shouting, and stumbled forward and past me with a precise slap of my staff against the back of his armour I tipped him all the way into falling into a pack of shelves already on fire. Now that left the other pest, arguably the most dangerous of the two in the current circumstances – one hit in the wrong place from that sword of his and the illusion making me look like the Enchanter was gone.

"Keeper," the Blade shouted, "it's the Dead King, he's overpowering us!"

The Maddened Keeper, huh? Not who I would have guessed. That might get real tricky if I wasn't careful. The Blade of Mercy was not content with merely calling for reinforcements, naturally. A little more careful than the Mirror Knight, he sliced through a library stack and then caught the side of it with the flat of his sword, tossing it towards me with a mighty heave. It was a beautiful display of dexterity and skill, the sort no human without a Name would really be able to replicate. It was also a showman's attack, so obvious in the coming I would hesitate to call that anticipating. And actually, with a little bit of movement. I took one step back to call his aim where I wanted it at the right moment in the swing, then two swifter steps to the right. The Mirror Knight, freshly back on his feet, ate fresh wooden debris right in the face. As for the Blade, who'd followed-up the toss with a dash forward, I almost sighed.

He was moving too quickly, his large and heavy sword dragging behind him. It was sloppy swordsmanship, the mark of a boy who relied on his Name for the kill instead of proper footwork and technique. I'd indulge him with a lesson on how a projectile should actually be used in a fight between Named, out of the goodness of my heart. I leaned forward, waiting until he'd closed distance, and the book I still held in my free hand was tossed at his face. Light flashed over his skin, some sort of protection, but it wouldn't help: the Night within the book I'd already called on, and the detonation of heat looked close enough to a fireball that it ought to pass. More importantly the flames that went out were not, strictly speaking, magic or Night. Just regular fire, against which Light was no protection. Flame and debris went into the boy's eyes even as I cast half a glance behind me, adjusted my angle as I took two steps forward and with the side of my staff struck at the Blade's side. I didn't hurt his momentum, just redirected it.

The Blade of Mercy tumbled into the risen Mirror Knight, and the two tumbled back into the fire.

It should be about time for the Maddened Keeper to show up, which was good as I was running out of petty tricks. I began to walk away, hearing the roar of power behind me as the heroes extricated themselves from the mess in a fury. The flames had spread, while we skirmished, so it was unpleasant to the ear to sharpen my hearing but no less necessary. Footsteps could hardly be discerned, but hardly was enough. By the time the heroes were – more cautiously than before – headed towards me once more, I ended the sharpening and waited for what had been arranged to take its course once more. My steps slowed, just as a flickering silhouetted passed the edge of soot-touched stacks with a glinting knife in hand and struck out – missing, for I'd ceased to advance the side of the stacks blocked the deeper angle of the blow. It wasn't the knife that worried me, though, even if it was a Named wielding it. The Maddened Keeper's eyes would be a lot more dangerous to me than her blade right now.

Fortunately, I still had a card up my sleeve.

The long-haired Named withdrew her hand lightning-quick and took half a step into the alley where I stood, prompting shouts of triumph from the Proceran Named behind me, but those were short-lived. With calculated brutality, Archer leapt down from the top of the stacks and her boots tore into the side of the Maddened Keeper's face. The slender woman fell, taken utterly by surprise, and Archer leaned over after landing on her torso to make two quick cuts with her knives. She didn't cut the eyes themselves, as there might be complications in healing that, but instead just above them. The blood would drip down and blind her, but just to be sure Indrani smeared what was already flowing into the to the Keeper's hoarse shout of pain. I turned, cast a disdainful look at the Proceran heroes who were frozen with fear and anger.

"Take care of the rabble," I told Archer. "They cannot be allowed to interfere with what we came for."

Indrani, still hidden as the Black Sickle, did not nod. Revenants were sometimes capable of such things, but the Sickle had not been. I'd pitched my voice just loud enough that the Mirror Knight and his companion should be able to hear me, and watched them from the corner of my eye. *That's right, I thought as Christophe's gaze narrowed, you overheard me saying too much in my utter contempt for you lot. Now figure out that I'm here for something properly nefarious, like turning the Doddering Sage into a Revenant or somesuch.*

"He's here for Hakram Deadhand," the Mirror Knight said. "Blade, run to him. The Dead King's trying to frame us for murdering the Black Queen's second."

That... was not what I would have gotten from that, but Hells I'd take it. Even odds he still thought the Black Queen was conspiring with 'me', though. Well, I got what I'd come for. Now I just had to follow the most honoured of villainous traditions and turn a clear pair of heels to this situation. Archer would delay them for a bit and slip out, there weren't any of them here who were her rivals in those arts. I just needed to make a sufficiently clean break, which without using Night might be... ah, this would do. I turned a corner around shelves already merrily burning and, discreetly hit it pretty hard with my staff.

It collapsed, and as the fire flooded my back I legged my way out of there.

Right, onto the next part of this. I needed to steal a dead body, then see someone about having a chat with it.

Chapter 18: Clout

"You bargained for my soul, dear devil, and that is what you received. Is it my fault you did not stipulate it was to be my original one?"

– Dread Emperor Traitorous, trading the soul of a single gnat for infernal enlightenment

We shed the illusions like one would shed a cloak.

We'd get more use out of us being the Black Queen and the Archer right now, though there was also an aspect here of knowing I should not press my luck too much. I was a villain who'd just finished the first part of her plan, securing the expected victory, which meant I was due a nasty surprise if I kept going down the path. Best to shake off this story and embrace another before the teeth of it could come around to bite me. Gods forgive me, but tonight I would be following down the path Kairos Theodosian had so brazenly blazed through while he lived: always scheming, always at odds, so that very same thing that should be burying you instead kept you alive. I did not miss the Tyrant of Helike himself, for he'd been cruel and feckless and admirable only in his qualities turned against others, but sometimes I did miss the times I associated him with in my memory. The days where my foes had breathed and there had been an end to them.

"So what are we doing now?" Archer asked.

She'd caught up to me quickly enough, swift on the stride as she was, and shrugged when I'd asked if she had any difficulty shaking off the opposition. I would have given her good odds of pulling this off even without Creation's favour blowing into our sails, so I was not surprised. None of the Named I'd seen of the band of five so far were made for the subtle side of things –

well, neither of the Procerans anyways. I still knew distressingly little about the Maddened Keeper.

"When you asked me for the Harrowed Witch for your band," I said, "you gave me two reasons. The first was that her stealth sorceries were impressive. The other was—"

"Aspasie is good at calling up the dead to chat with," Indrani finished. "Which has been worth more than gold, Named being Named. So who is it we're going to be chatting with?"

"The same man whose body we need to make disappear," I said. "If the Wicked Enchanter has been seen walking around but his corpse is still on a slab, fingers will start being pointed."

"We get my witch or your dead body first?" Archer asked.

She was a practical woman, my Indrani, and I really did enjoy that. Not the kind that would balk at either borrowing — it wasn't stealing if you were a queen, probably — a dead body or calling on the spirits of the dead for questioning. Much as I liked, say, Hanno I suspected he'd not be up for a spot of corpse robbery without several serious questions first being asked.

"The corpse," I mused. "Quiet-like, yeah? The point is to get it to the Harrowed Witch, so we'll avoid being seen bringing her there."

If we showed up there with a known necromancer in tow we'd be giving away the game. I cast a sideways look at Indrani.

"Her dead brother's still haunting her?" I asked.

"Sure, but it's more nuisance than trouble," Archer shrugged. "And I'll answer the question you're building up to before you ask it, spare us both some trouble. She can be trusted, Cat. She's not Woe, won't ever be, but she knows who to close ranks with."

It'd have to do. It wasn't like the villains we'd picked up since declaring the Truce and the Terms were all black-hearted treacherous devils, though admittedly we *had* picked up a few of those. It was just that, as a rule, they tended to be a lot less preoccupied with other people's wellbeing than the White Knight's lot. Villains, I'd learned, were not beyond loyalty. But they had the loyalty of wolves, to the pack that bit and bled for them, while heroes instead had the loyalty of knights: to oath and realm and Good. It didn't necessarily make the champions of the Heavens pleasant people, but on the other hand I couldn't deny that Hanno's side of the fence counted not a single rapist or thrill-killer. There were days, when the likes of the Mirror Knight's ingratitude and ignorance became so *very grating*, that it was tempting to forget things like that. Tempting to forget

that there was more to villains than the Woe and the Calamities, that the banner I'd chosen to bear had flown tall over millennia of dark deeds.

I couldn't afford to close my eyes to that, going forward. Not if the Truce and Terms were to one day be remembered as the prelude to the Liesse Accords, as I so badly wanted them to be.

"I'll take your word on it," I said. "We need to get a move on, 'Drani. There's at least one of that band that'll remember to go look for the Enchanter's corpse as soon as nobody's in danger anymore."

She snorted.

"Wouldn't count on that," she said.

I shook my head. Tempting as it was to take the Mirror Knight and his ilk as all Light and no brains, it'd be a mistake.

"Wind was out our back and the sun in their eyes in there," I reminded her. "We get in scrap with them again, and we'll get what Revenants get. A third time and it'll be *us* with the wind in our faces."

"Won't make them any smarter," Indrani pointed out.

"We fought their two frontliners and ambushed the eyes," I said. "Someone serves as the thinking head of that band, we just haven't run into them yet. Any cart's a bad cart if you take off half the wheels."

Hopefully Adjutant would be keeping whoever that was pointed in the right direction, cleaning up behind any mistakes Indrani and I might have made. Not that we'd be the ones having made the greater share of mistakes in there. The two Procerans here, in particular, had proved significantly easier to handle than I'd expected. It made a horrible sort of sense, now that I thought about it, because though I heard about things the Mirror Knight had done all the time I couldn't honestly recall a single story where he'd been the *leader*. He wasn't even a band's second, most the time: he was the brawns to the Witch of the Woods' magic, Hanno's vanguard or bait for the Silver Huntress. Was this a blunder of our own making, I wondered? *The man's an ignorant ass, but has anyone actually tried to set him straight and teach him to recognize what's going on around him?* It ought to have been his responsibility to see to that, sure, for he was a grown man and few of us had gotten to have our hands held through the process of gaining power. But then was it not undeniably a blunder to let a hero with that kind of power stew in a puddle of his own obtuseness, growing ever more frustrated and wary?

Something to consider more in depth later, I decided. It would be Hanno's failure more than mine, but I'd never spoken a word about it either and that made for shared responsibility. Indrani and I had been moving even as we talked and quickened our pace further as we fell into silence, her longer stride letting her take the lead as she guided me through the hallways of the Arsenal. I inquired as to our destination and learned that after the Wicked Enchanter was butchered before half a hundred people, his body had been taken away to the Depository. I'd been a little surprised to hear that, considering that was the part of the Arsenal where all the weapons and artefacts were kept in crates until they could be shipped to the fronts: it was a storehouse, more or less. But it was apparently a storehouse with some fairly secure sections, and as one of the parts of this place where no Named resided it'd been deemed as the least provocative of the places to stash a villain's dead body.

"There's going to be guards," I said.

"Of course," Indrani agreed. "But people aren't allowed in and it's a sealed room."

Meaning that if we went in and, after a few moments, popped back out asking the guards where the Hells the body was there shouldn't be anyone able to gainsay us. I could dump the corpse in the Night until we got it to the Harrowed Witch, so we wouldn't essentially be blatantly lying with a dead body strapped onto Archer's back. When we got there the whole affair turned out to be, well, surprisingly straightforward. There was a full line of guards by the door, Lycaonese by the looks of them, and their commanding officer had the key to the wards. I was recognized, even without my cloak, and when I requested entry they didn't even bother to ask me why before accepting. Obviously I had the right, since this was a dead villain and I'd been his representative under the Terms, but I was somewhat surprised at how utterly indifferent the Lycaonese were to the whole thing.

The key to the wards was a simple stone disk that unmade the sealing enchantment on the steel-barded door when pressed into a slot above the handle and it remained in there even as I opened it and slipped inside. The tingle of other wards washed over me as I did – probably a few to prevent coming in by Arcadia and Twilight, and perhaps to prevent summoning within – but there was no other defence. The dead body was in the back, on what was very clearly four wooden shipping crates covered by a slab of steel, thought at least someone had placed a white shroud over it. There was no corpse-stench in the bare stone room, which meant the corpse had been preserved. By alchemy and not enchantment, I noted, since the sharp tang of embalming fluid and something more like flowers was lingering in the air. Good, the Night wouldn't disrupt anything when I took the body then.

I checked it was the Enchanter under the shroud, sought Indrani's confirmation it was the right man and received it with a nod, then I seized Night a heartbeat later. The body sunk into the darkness I wove under it, and I breathed in through my mouth as I began choosing my words.

Time to raise a ruckus about the theft of the body I'd just stolen.

—

The damned song just wouldn't leave my head, I mused as I poured myself a fresh finger of aragh and knocked it back.

"The henhouse stands unlatched

All within, by the fox snatched."

A fresh change of clothes had done me some good, though that wasn't the main reason I'd done it and ordered Indrani to do the same before sending her out. Smoke had a particular scent to it, and not one easy to hide. At least one Named was bound to notice if we kept wearing garments smelling of a fire we weren't supposed to have been anywhere near. I dressed formally, or at least what passed as formal for me: having a soldier queen's reputation meant I could dispense with a lot of the finery some other crowned heads might be stuck wearing. The heart of it was a high-collared and long-sleeved tunic of dark green, bordered in deep gold and going down to my calves. It was split all the way down to my belly by more elaborate embroidery in the same golden colour, though buttons kept it closed and close against me all the way up to the hollow of my throat – where the sole button I'd left unmade prevented the tunic from digging into my skin.

A broader belt that I was used to in good leather was kept in a complicated knot I'd taken me ages to learn how to make without Hakram's help and ended in a long stripe going down to slightly below the hem of my tunic. The buckles were gilded and a few patches as well though they were inscribed with the Crown and Sword instead of simply polished, lending the whole thing a rather ceremonial look. Trousers of the same good cloth and colour ended in knee-high boots of fine make, which I'd insisted have enough room for a knife to be slipped in. Up the sleeve of my tunic, an old gift from Pickler I more rarely wore these days had been made to serve a again: a complicated set of knots and leather strings that could have a knife falling into my palm a beat later if I flicked my wrist just right. With the Mantle of Woe on my back, my hair pulled back into a long braid and a bare circlet of gold that sat high on brow as my crown, for once I looked like a queen and not a soldier with a looted crown.

There might be more truth to the second of these, in the end, but appearances were too useful a tool to be discarded.

I'd abandoned my rooms not long after making use of them, preferring instead to return to that same small parlour in the Alcazar I'd used to entertain the Hunted Magician. The half-empty bottle of aragh from earlier had been pining for me there, along with what looked like little slices of bread with some sort of mousse on them. It smelled like meat and spices and it tasted delicious, so I polished off a few while waiting for Archer to return with the Harrowed Witch in tow. I was careful with crumbs and stains, since I was not going to go through all the trouble of dressing up regally only for the impression being ruined by mousse on the corner of my lips. The song stayed with me, and as I hummed absent-mindedly my brow rose: someone had knocked at my door. That wasn't Indrani, who would not have bothered herself with courtesy like knocking before entering a room in general, much less a room I was in. I discreetly brushed off some crumbs from my cloak and gathered myself on the sofa.

"Enter," I called out.

So here they go, once again, I hummed under my breath. Chasing a red tail into the glen.

Adjutant was the first to step into the room, giving me a bow that told me two things: this was a formal visit, and he did not trust whoever was with him with even the light knowledge of our usual informality with each other. Considering who it was I'd sent him out with, I could understand why. The Mirror Knight entered behind him and I noted with approval he'd been made to relegate his sword and shield before coming into my presence. The staff of yew laid lightly on my shoulder was a comforting weight, even though it was more a focus of my powers than a weapon. Behind good ol' Christophe was not his perennial shadow the Blade of Mercy, to my surprise, but instead a more familiar sight.

The Repentant Magister, Nephele Eliade, was the very painting of what people thought of when talking of a Free Cities beauty. Though her face was sharp in cast and her nose strong, pale grey eyes and luxurious long dark hair would have made her worth a second look even if she'd not been a supple and curvy woman. There was a highborn look to her, in the way she stood and spoke, that'd made it easy to believe she had been born to the highest reaches of the Magisterium of Stygia. The Eliade, I'd been told, remained one of the most influential families in the city-state to this day.

I'd first encountered Nephele in Hainaut, as in the early days of the war against Keter she'd already been our foremost authority on the Dead King's necromantic constructs. Even Akua had expressed admiration when she'd read her work on ghouls, and the shade was rather stingier with praise than Masego. In those days there'd not yet been an Arsenal, so the Repentant Magister had moved wherever there was a need for her. Her presence was always

an easy sell, given that while she was not an impressive combat mage she was an extremely talented healer and capable of making artefacts that more than made up for her lacking offensive spellcraft. I'd found her rather pleasant, and not only because she usually wore tight velour dresses with dipping necklines. I would have expected someone emerged heroic from the horrors of Stygia to be eager to distance themselves from anything and anyone bearing Below's mark, but she'd turned out to be almost serene about it.

That calm certainty, the knowledge of her place in the world, had been damned attractive and I'd begun making polite inquiries about her preferences – flexible, thank the Gods – to what I'd thought might just be a receptive audience when she'd left Hainaut to help found the Arsenal. Unfinished business, all in all, but not unpleasantly so. The kind that might even be picked up should the situation allow. Now, though, I had to consider her in an entirely different way. Already the Hunted Magician had told me that Nephele was part of whatever the Blessed Artificer was up to, only for her to be turning up *here* as well? I couldn't be sure she was part of the Mirror Knight's band of five, not yet, but neither would be it an unwarranted assumption. *What is it you're actually up to, Nephele?* No third hero followed the first two, which I found interesting. It meant there were still three of them out there, out of my sight.

"Your Majesty," Hakram greeted me. "If I may?"

"Proceed, Adjutant," I granted, leaning back into the sofa.

"I present Christophe of Pavanie, the Mirror Knight," the orc said, "and Lady Nephele Eliade of Stygia, the Repentant Magister. They would humbly request audience of you."

The Mirror Knight looked like he'd swallowed a lemon, but he didn't actually contradict Hakram. Huh, I'd not believed he had it in him. Nephele's face was unreadable, not trace of our previous acquaintance there to be found. I poured myself another splash of aragh. Was that a bit of a sting I felt? *We're never as charming as we think we are, Catherine*, I reminded myself.

"Then be seated," I said. "I expect this'll be interesting."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," the Repentant Magister said, bowing slightly.

Gods, that accent. Helikeans sounded like they were spitting out every other word in Chantant, but the Stygian accent was like silk in the ear. Didn't hurt that she had one of those smooth, throaty voices either. The Mirror Knight offered a curt nod and seated himself briskly, the heroine following suit more gracefully a moment later. Hakram stepped back, standing behind

the sofa they occupied and looming as only an orc of his towering height could.

"There is a traitor in the Arsenal," the Mirror Knight gravely said.

My eyes moved to Adjutant, who nodded, then returned to the other two as I cocked a brow.

"I take it you have evidence for such a claim," I said.

"Two Revenants were allowed past the wards," the hero said, "which is impossible without someone on this side letting them in."

My eyes flicked to Nephele, who bowed her head.

"I believe they were not truly Revenants," the dark-haired heroine evenly said, "but instead masking their true identities through an illusion. Which does not change the truth of what Christophe has said: there is a traitor in the Arsenal, and likely more than one."

Well now, wasn't that interesting? Not the revelation itself, as it was a conclusion I'd been inching towards myself for some time – the Bard would need boots on the ground to pull off something like this, there was only so much that could be done without willing hands – but that they'd bring it to me of all people. Nephele had allegedly been sniffing around Quartered Seasons, which for someone with only cursory knowledge of my intentions might very well look like an attempt at apotheosis, and the Mirror Knight both disliked and distrusted me. I sipped at my aragh, considering, and delicately set down the cup.

"I am surprised," I said, "that a man who accused me of plotting murder not a bell ago would now come to me with such tidings. Unless, of course, you mean to accuse me."

The Proceran hero grit his teeth and did not look away from my gaze, dark green eyes matching my own.

"I see what you are, Black Queen," the Mirror Knight said, tone curt. "You have fooled the White Knight and broken the Grey Pilgrim, but *I* see *you*. Carrion Queen, heiress to a lord of the same: you burrow into the heart and then claim the body for yourself. You stole the armies of Praes, the Kingdom of Callow, the Tenth Crusade and now you would do the same to the Grand Alliance itself. I will not let you make yourself queen of the Chosen and Damned, Gods preserve me in this."

"But," Nephele mildly said.

"But," the Mirror Knight continued, tone reluctant, "you are foe to the Dead King and all his works. This I... recognize."

How kind of him. I was a little skeptical, though, considering that when I'd been veiled as the Wicked Enchanter he'd accused 'me' of having made a pact with the Black Queen. Unless he'd been baiting a monologue? Possible, though he didn't seem like the sort. As far as I knew most of the foes he'd faced since becoming Named had been Revenants, and there was very little subtlety required in dealing with those.

"All well and good," I said. "But it doesn't tell me what brings you *here*."

"We require your understanding, Queen Catherine, in dealing with these troubles," the Repentant Magister said. "We are aware that there are... tensions within the Arsenal, but the situation requires investigation nonetheless."

"You want my permission to run your own Chosen inquisition," I said.

My tone expressed *exactly* what I thought of that without needing to say anything more.

"You are on Proceran land," the Mirror Knight said through gritted teeth.

"Do tell the First Prince that, preferably when I'm in the room," I drily replied. "I've never seen her blush in utter embarrassment before."

The Arsenal was not in Creation and had been made explicitly beyond Proceran rule by multiple treaties besides. Actual laws here were a complicated issue, with nations being responsible for the people they provided and Named themselves falling largely under the Terms.

"We believe," Nephele said, "that your second has already been a target."

My brow rose and I looked at Hakram before returning to her.

"I'm listening," I said.

"You have heard of the fire in the Miscellaneous Stacks?" she asked.

"I have," I cautiously said. "You are arguing that the Revenants were responsible for this?"

"It was an assassination attempt on the Adjutant," the Mirror Knight bluntly said. "You sent him to question the Doddering Sage

discreetly, and it was seen as an opening. If my companions and I had not arrived in time he'd be dead."

Huh. Well, Hakram clearly ought to be grateful at having his life preserved in such a manner by upstanding ladies and gentlemen, I mused.

"That was the plot, Queen Catherine," the Repentant Magister quietly said. "Your second dead on the ground, and only heroes there among the ashes. Someone is trying to set us against one another."

She was very much correct about that but given that I was seated across from two of the blades the Wandering Bard was currently swinging at me I couldn't exactly come out and tell her as much. Still, this was a pleasing turn. I seemed to have accidentally stumbled into the role of authority figure these enterprising investigating rogues might somewhat answer to, which was something I could work with.

"You'll understand," I said, "that while I might believe you speak the truth at least in part, I also have sworn responsibilities. Letting Chosen run amok in the Arsenal and interrogate my lot without supervision would be a gross failure of those oaths."

Nephele was clever enough to see through that, but then she'd been clever before entering this room: she would have known that their request for my blessing to hunt as they wished had no chance of being accepted without some alterations to what had been proposed.

"What if we had one of the Damned with us as well?" the Mirror Knight said. "Someone you can trust."

"You have a name for me, I take it?" I asked, brow raised.

He looked back at Hakram. The same orc whose life he had 'saved', who he would have sent to save unconscious custodians and not been failed by. That decision made itself, didn't it?

"The Adjutant is a good man," Christophe firmly said. "It would not be an injury to count him among our number."

But we know, oh we know, I almost hummed, *that in the woods, the fox is king.*

This would do, I decided. With Hakram following them and serving as my voice I could count on them keeping out of my way while I expunged the Bard's influence from this fortress one pawn at a time. With a little luck, they might even actually unearth a *real* conspiracy that I'd missed.

"Where would you begin?" I said, tacitly accepting.

The Repentant Magister released a long breath, though the Mirror Knight only nodded as this was expected. His due. *Dislike cannot dictate policy*, I reminded myself, *or I would have been at war with every other Calernian nation within a year of my coronation.*

"The Hunted Magician has been seen going in and out of the Workshop at odd hours," the Mirror Knight told me.

Because he's been carrying on two love affairs with heroines, I thought, *the most impressive part of this being that he's yet to lose a limb*. Mind you, if I was the Intercessor I'd consider the Hunted Magician as a good in for the Arsenal: he had an enemy he'd probably do next to anything to avoid being found by, and precious few scruples as a person. If they wanted to dig there they had my blessing.

"It's start," I agreed. "Come back to me when you've found something. I might even have insights of my own to share, as I'm looking into a few things as well."

"It might be," Nephele softly said, "that some of your own trusted have not proved entirely deserving of that trust."

Well now, that was something. A warning, if I read her right. And considering she was one of the Arsenal regulars and there was only one of the Woe who shared that state of affairs? She was warning me about Hierophant. *Quartered Seasons*, I decided. *She's dug up something about Quartered Seasons, and she's decided that Masego is deceiving me somehow*. Or she was trying to sow dissent between myself and Hierophant. Either way, it was a swing and a miss. Zeze honestly didn't care enough about my approval to lie, it wasn't how his head worked. He'd either go through with it anyway or decide it wasn't worth the trouble, deception wouldn't be part of the recipe either way. That the Repentant Magister had said that at all, though, was telling. Masego was fairly open about his intention to one day reach apotheosis on his own terms and *Quartered Seasons* might be seen as a way to that. The Repentant Magister, and likely the Blessed Artificer as well, knew enough about the project to misunderstand. That put the alleged blinding of Masego by the Blessed Artificer in a rather more sinister light.

Someone had just shot up the list of problems I needed to handle.

"I am not," I said, "in the habit of leaving stones unturned. Go, you two. I'll speak with Adjutant a moment and send him after you."

It got a nod from the Mirror Knight and a proper bow from Nephele, though she also carefully studied my face as she moved. I do not know what she found there, but she left looking

satisfied. The doors was barely closed and the courtesies done when I turned a steady gaze to Hakram.

"Who's the fifth?" I asked.

Mirror Knight, Blade of Mercy, Maddened Keeper and Repentant Magister. That made four, which meant there was one left I'd not seen. I would have bet the Exalted Poet, before Nephele's presence was revealed, but now I had doubts. Bands of five were rarely so heavy on Gifted.

"The Vagrant Spear," Hakram replied.

Shit, Archer's second? That explained why she'd not heard armour, but we were lucky we'd not run into her: she likely would have recognized Indrani, glamour or not. Fuck, we actually gotten pretty lucky on that. If I'd not acted to split the band of five, Archer would probably have been outed. *The first step never fails, huh?* I'd been so worried about good eyes I'd missed the greater threat of simple familiarity. A reminder the victory was rarely quite as triumphant as it felt when it was happening.

"What's she after?" I asked.

"I believe she is trying to keep the Red Axe alive," he said. "And was drawn in by the Mirror Knight's impassioned defence of her right to break the Terms for a revenge killing."

The Red Axe had travelled with Archer's band to come here, hadn't she? And as I recalled, the Spear had almost begun a fight with the Hunted Magician over the Enchanter's corpse. I'd need to ask Indrani about this, looked like. The way that Adjutant had phrased his answer told me both what I'd asked and his own opinion of the matter, which was rather helpful of him given how little time we had. I'd need to cut him loose soon else his new companions would ask questions, but I still had a bit more.

"Mirror Knight," I said. "Your opinion of him?"

"There is more him than I had anticipated," the orc gravelled. "Genuinely unambitious, but he clearly sees himself as the flagbearer of Proceran heroism with all that entails. And he's on the edge, Catherine. Sometimes he snaps at the Blade of Mercy and the boy always looks surprised, so it can't be habitual."

I slowly nodded. That made the man even more dangerous, truth be told. People did stupid and dangerous things when they felt they had no other choice. I was glad I'd asked, since that would change how the Knight would need to be handled: *carefully*, in a word.

"On your end?" Hakram asked.

"Going to ask the Wicked Enchanter some questions," I replied.
"Indrani should be here any moment."

"Then I'll leave, they might be waiting for me outside," Hakram said.

And we would not want them to run into each other. I got up to clasp his arm before sending him out, and when the door closed I closed my eyes and breathed out. The song hadn't quite left me, I found as the hum left my lips.

"Yes we know, oh we know

That in the woods, the fox is king."

Chapter 19: Spectral

"I'm afraid that that old saying about resting when you're dead has proved overly optimistic, my good fellows."

– Dread Empress Malevolent III

Having a dead body splayed on a table in an otherwise nice room was oddly nostalgic, I'd admit. It made me miss my sappers, who back in the old days had brought me the corpses of my enemies much like cats brought home chewed-up birds. It'd been too long since I'd sat down with Robber and Pickler in person, though in truth I might be able to see them before too long: if we went on the offensive in Hainaut to take back its capital and secure the shores, I'd want them both as part of the attacking army. There wasn't anyone quite like them when it came to getting the job done.

"The spirit still has ties to the body," the Harrowed Witch told us. "I can summon it back for a time, Your Majesty, if that is your wish."

The villainess looked nervous around me, as she'd been ever since I'd made it clear I could see through the enchantments she used to hide. I couldn't, actually, but the Crows could and I was not above the occasional lie to obscure the true scope of my abilities. Brown-eyed, brown-haired and rather drab in both clothes and conversation the other woman had a slight hunch in her shoulders that never quite went away – like she was expecting someone to slap her hard in the back at any moment. As I understood it the brother she'd murdered and now haunted her could not directly touch her, but as his strength waxed and waned the wraith was capable of speaking to her and sometimes even throw small objects.

Archer was inexplicably fond of this one, though I supposed Aspasia might be an acquired taste. Indrani herself was lounging on the edge of the sofa, having stolen the last of my bottle along with the nice little snacks the servants had put out during my absence. Admittedly the Wicked Enchanter's corpse had taken up the table where the plate had been waiting, but that was no excuse to just steal the whole thing and begin tearing through them.

"Is it actually the soul you call back?" I asked, genuinely curious.

In theory, necromancy was capable of doing that. In practice necromancers tended to prefer setting up wards to prevent the souls from passing on or even outright binding the soul to the body before killing the individual – as Masego had once done for me, before First Liesse – since calling back a soul gone past the veil of death was tricky at the best of times. The only mages I'd ever heard of regularly doing such a thing were the Twilight Sages of the drow, who were long gone and their knowledge destroyed. The Sisters had seen to that, and thoroughly.

"The priests say it isn't," the Harrowed Witch hedged. "That it's just some spirit called up from the death and the echo of the mind."

Said priests had declared me an abomination in a Salian conclave after I'd tricked a resurrection out of the Hashmallim, so I was inclined to take their assertions with a grain of salt. Though calling back a soul was hardly resurrection the House of Light in the west had always jealously guarded what it saw as the sole domain of the Heavens, and thus theirs. Proceran mages having been squeezed out of the healing trade was proof enough of that.

"And what do you believe?" I asked.

"Even if they're right," she shrugged, "there's not much difference, is there? Whether the spirit's fresh or old, it's still got the same stuffing."

"Praesi believe it's the soul," Archer told me. "And that the imperfect memory is because you can't drag one back without damaging it some, not unless the formula is perfect in a way no one's managed."

Yeah, well, just as the Proceran priesthood had a vested interest in claiming this to be spirit-work it could be said that the Praesi had an interest in claiming the opposite. The Wasteland was fond of claiming its ways would make you as a god, if you were good enough at them. And if someone could master life and death, while it might not make you a God shouldn't it make you at least the lesser kind?

"So long as I get my own questions answered, that one we can leave to the Wasteland and the priests," I said. "Do it, Witch."

"By your will, Black Queen," the villainess bowed.

She knelt by the Wicked Enchanter's corpse and laid hands on his face, peeling open the sightless eyes and prying open his mouth. Two fingers she pressed against the black and swollen tongue, whispering urgently in the mage tongue, and the same again on the ear of the left side and then the right.

"Three black pearls were granted unto me by the spirits of the land, and I bestow upon you their use this hour," the Harrowed Witch said, her Chantant fluid and beautiful and ringing of something that was not Chantant at all. "One that you may hear, and in death obey. One that you may speak, as I bid you now. One that you may know once more, heedful and waking. I know the secrets of the sleeping stones and I have heard the echoes that outlived the word: I am mistress among the lost, and I command you to *return*."

The last word reverberated with power, with will, and though it was neither aspect nor Speaking it was the culmination of a skilled witch's craft: the weight of it was not to be trifled with. A burst of cold wind passed through the parlour even as the Wicked Enchanter's corpse took a ragged gasp, as if the corpse had somehow sucked in the air, the brown-haired witch laid a hand atop the corpses' brow. The shadows in the well-lit room somehow seemed longer to me, and deeper in their darkness.

"I have him," she said, brow furrowed in concentration. "Ask your questions, and swiftly: he struggles against the call."

I cast a look at Indrani, who seemed only mildly interested by all of this. Not her first time up close to such a thing, I imagined. Well, might as well get this over with.

"Are you the Wicked Enchanter?" I asked.

"I am," the corpse rasped.

He twitched, as if trying to say more but being prevented by the Witch's firm grasp.

"Have you ever spoken with, or been spoken at by, a woman named Marguerite of Baillons?"

"I have not," the corpse rasped.

I frowned. Had the Wandering Bard changed face and name once more? No, perhaps my mistake had been of a different sort.

"Have you ever spoken with, or been spoken at by, the Wandering Bard?" I asked.

"Yes," the corpse rasped.

My veins thrummed with something that was neither fear nor excitement, for though I was not cowed by the notion of tangling with the Intercessor neither was I looked forward to it. I already had too many deadly enemies. And yet I would not deny that I was also relieved. Until that single word, it'd been possible that I was just putting up my own fears on a blank slate. Now I knew my enemy, and the war could begin in earnest.

"What did she tell you?"

"She warned me that I had been noticed," the Wicked Enchanter's shade told us. "And that my joys in the wilds would come to an end."

As I recalled, the dead villain had been the one to seek out the Grand Alliance and not the other way around, though there'd been some rumours of his existence in the far south.

"And this convinced you to seek out the Truce and Terms?" I pressed.

"Eventually. I brought my court to another three villages first."

So there it was, I mused. There was a story, back home, about one of the petty kings that'd ruled in Callow before the Albans united the realm. An old man, said in some tales to have ruled over Liesse and others in Dormer, but all agreed he'd been as harsh a tyrant as they come. But his knights had stayed loyal, and kept him from knives in the back, and for subtler threats he had bargained with a wizard. For great favours he'd won an enchanted amulet that would glow when in the presence of poisons, and so for many years the tyrant had ruled safely in his castle. Until one day a clever cook, whose kin had been killed on the tyrant's whim, arranged for a particular plate to be served: grilled mushrooms, the savoury kind growing in stone shadows known as the 'False Wings'.

The tyrant ate, for the amulet had not glowed, and then drank of his favourite mead as he every meal. The mushrooms, the False Wings, were not a poison. Neither was the mead. Yet mixed together, as they were in the tyrant's belly, they became a deadly mixture. The story went that the tyrant did not die of the poison, actually, but went so mad from the pain eating his insides he'd thrown himself off the highest tower of his keep.

The Wicked Enchanter was not, by himself, poison for the Truce and Terms. Scum, there was no denying that, but even scum was worth marshalling when the King of Death was on the march. The Truce being extended to the likes of him was the price of being able to pull in villains not quite so vile, who otherwise might wonder exactly where the line was drawn and elicit to instead

remain in hiding – or, worse, make troubles at our back. *And it's necessary for what is to come*, I thought. The Liesse Accords must apply to everyone, even the worst of us, and if their predecessor-treaty had been used as a way to execute villains many of Below's would see them as a tool of heroic control and nothing more. Yet the Wicked Enchanter would have been tolerated, if he lent his Name and skills to the war against Keter.

He only became poison when the Red Axe was added to the meal: a heroine born of his very depredations, fated by her Role to slay him. And when she'd fulfilled that role, well... There would be time to consider the full breadth of that blow later, I told myself. First there was one last piece of information that I must extract from the dead. While it was possible the Bard would have relied on mere chance to have the two fated foes encounter each other, and chance did tend towards a certain theatrical certainty when it came to Named, the way the killing had been described to me smacked of it being arranged. It'd taken place in the Knot, the central halls of the Arsenal, when they were filled with people and other Named were not too far – yet not so close that they might be able to intervene.

The Intercessor had boots on the ground, like as not, and I wanted to know who was filling them.

"When you encountered the Red Axe," I said, "where were you headed?"

"To the Repository."

My brow rose.

"Why?" I asked him.

"A supply convoy had come the day before," the corpse rasped. "The red orchid I paid for would be stashed in the usual crate."

"I can't hold much longer," the Harrowed Witch hoarsely said.

I nodded in acknowledgement. Smuggling, huh. I supposed I shouldn't be surprised: this place might be a wonder, but in the end people were people. I'd see to it this leak was plugged and whoever was involved got the noose, but what had been mentioned was not familiar to me. Red orchid, was it? I cast a curious look at Archer, whose own brow rose.

"Drug," she told me. "Hard stuff, expensive and from the Free Cities. Hard to kick when the hooks are in, too."

Probably illegal in Procer, I mused. An addiction – particularly one to a substance even Indrani seemed wary of – was an obvious lever for the Bard to use, I thought, but there would have been need for another Named to arrange the practical aspects of it.

Possible well in advance, I thought, which was a disquieting notion.

"How did you hear about smuggler?" I asked the corpse.

"I was told by the Concocter," the shade of the Wicked Enchanter rasped.

And there went the last detail I'd needed to know.

"Thank you for your service," I told the dead thing. "You will receive your dues under the Terms, even from the grave."

And not an inch more, I thought. I gestured at the brown-haired witch, signifying I was done.

"Kill the girl," the corpse hissed. "*Killkillkillkill-*"

"I release you," the Harrowed Witch gasped. "Begone."

Wind blew out violently, rustling my cloak and pushing back strands of my hair, but in its wake the room seemed settled. There'd been a weight in the air, a tension, that had now been released. Sweat beaded the villainess brow, and she was panting like she'd just fought for her life.

"What a charmer, that one," I nonchalantly said. "But at least he was talkative, thanks to you. You've done me a good turn, Harrowed Witch."

"I know to keep my mouth shut, Your Majesty," she weakly replied. "There is no need to present the stick now that you've dangled the carrot."

"Archer's already vouched for you," I said, "else I would not have asked you at all."

Aspasie shot Indrani a surprised look. I sympathized with her there, as Archer's actual affections tended to be rather opaque. I tended to blame that on the Lady of the Lake, but honesty compelled me to admit it might have been in part natural inclination as well. Indrani replied with a smile, or at least tried to: she'd stuffed the last snack whole in her mouth, so her bulging cheeks rather undid the intended effect until she swallowed.

"I meant what I said," I told the witch. "Consider how you'd like the favour repaid and return to me when you are certain."

"You're powerful enough to simply compel my service," Aspasie said, sounding genuinely bewildered. "Why make this offer when you have nothing to gain?"

Because if you never reward siding with you, the only rewards to be won are in siding against you, I thought.

"Forced service is always mediocre," I said. "And I've no patience for such things. I'll use you, I won't deny that or pretend we are equals, but you will also gain from the use."

The Harrowed Witch slowly nodded, looking abashed, and hesitantly rose to her feet.

"I will keep your words in mind, Your Majesty," she said. "And return to you with an answer."

Archer from the side, finished licking up the last of the mousse on her fingers and snatched up my bottle of aragh. She tossed it at the brown-eyed witch, though she was too slow and only caught it after it'd hit her sternum and dropped into her outstretched hands.

"Archer," she complained.

"I know how your head gets after a restless calling," Indrani said, almost gentle. "Drink up, or you'll have a pounding headache by the time you get to your rooms."

"I'll still have one if I drink this," the Harrowed Witch said, "I'll simply be drunk as well."

"It'll take the edge off, at least," Archer snorted. "You still got your fancy herbs?"

"Julien scattered them," she mourned.

Her brother, I took it. The realization seemingly drove the decision to pull at the bottle, though she choked on the Praesi hard liquor and had to force herself to gulp it down.

"What is this, the Dead King's piss?" the Witch moaned, then had a moment of panic when she looked at me. "Um, I mean, Your Majesty-"

"Taghreb delicacy," I told her amusedly. "Consider yourself lucky you never tried dragon's milk."

"I might have something for your head," Indrani mused, "I'll pass by your rooms later."

"If you're just bringing a hammer again, that ceased being even slightly funny after the third time," the brown-haired woman complained.

I smothered my chuckle with all the practice of a woman well-acquainted with Indrani. It was a dismissal, even if one delivered by Archer instead of myself, and the villainess treated

it like one. She made her courtesies and departed swiftly, my bottle still in hand. I blew out a long breath after Archer closed the door behind her.

"The Concocter, huh," I said.

"She'd a shady, haughty prig," Indrani said, "always has been, but I don't think she's your traitor Cat. Hells, what would the Bard have to even offer her? She doesn't care about politics, only that she can keep making her potions."

I wasn't inclined to romanticize the Concocter having joined us without prompting, myself. Much like the Beastmaster she'd only come to us because Refuge had collapsed after Ranger's disappearance, though her concerns had been more direct than Beastmaster's: without a pack of Named to trade with, the Waning Woods had lost much of their appeal for her. It wasn't like she was going to be hunting for manticores or elderwood snakefangs herself. The Arsenal had been what she was after, the funding and books and safety of it, and she'd certainly thrived there. She'd gone from trading healing poultices in the woods to being able to order her pick of ingredients from Mercantis through Proceran envoys, and she'd been judged useful enough to be made the informal lead of one of the secret projects: Sudden Abjuration might also be under Roland, who was higher in the pecking order of the Arsenal, but it was ultimately an alchemical pursuit and so her word carried more weight than his.

"She's involved with the smuggling, at least," I replied. "And she brought in the Enchanter. I'm not saying she's an ardent partisan of the Bard, but do you really think she's above cutting a deal?"

The Intercessor had been studying human nature since the days where Calernia used bronze. She was a very, very skilled temptress when she put her mind to it.

"Dunno," Indrani reluctantly admitted. "The Lady was always keen on reminding us that fucking around with your betters was a sure way to get burned, and we all learned that lesson some, but the Concocter was always clever. She got ahead just by trading, and she used what she had to get away with a lot. It's always been her, then everybody else. I don't think even Lady Ranger knew her real name."

"I have questions for her," I said. "How nicely they'll be asked, that depends on her."

Indrani put up her hands in appeasement.

"Don't misunderstand, Cat," she said. "We shared a camp years ago, that's all there is to it. If you want to cut off a few fingers to set the mood, I'm not protesting. I'm just saying that

the Arsenal is a wet dream come true for her, so she'd be careful about not mucking it up too much."

I grunted in acknowledgement. To my understanding having shared the tutelage of the Ranger wasn't really the kind of shared history that bound people together closely, save perhaps in shared mingled fear and admiration of the woman, but I still knew precious little about Indrani's years there. She was rather tight-lipped about it, save for a few well-worn amusing stories she was always ready to dust off around a campfire when the drinks got flowing.

"Would she say more if you went knocking alone?" I asked.

"Would she be less wary if it wasn't the fucking *Black Queen* popping up unannounced?" Indrani said, sounding amused. "Who knows? It might just be one of those unsolvable mysteries of life."

I sighed.

"Fine," I said. "Go ahead, see what you can get out of her. But 'Drani, I need those answers. If you don't think you can-"

"I *can*," Archer assured me.

I searched her face for a moment, to see if it was stung pride talking, but she seemed certain.

"I'll get harsh if I have to," Indrani continued when I did not answer. "Cat, you can trust me with this."

But this was important, I almost said. This was the Bard, and I could not take risks, and... *You were warned by Adjutant that you could only take so much on your shoulders without running yourself ragged*, Akua's voice echoed, over the broken corpse of a boy and the bitter taste of failure. *You did not heed his words*. I couldn't handle this alone, guiding every moving part. Hells, having trusted allies might genuinely be the single absolute advantage I held over the Intercessor. And still it felt like a mistake to let Archer go alone, because what if *she* made a mistake? There was trusting someone, and then there was trusting them to win. I clenched my fists. *This is fear*, I thought. *This fear speaking through my lips, a worm slipped into my mind through my ear. And once fear rules, she is the mother of defeat.*

"Go," I said. "And ask about the gas in the Miscellaneous Stacks as well. There are others here who could make those, but she would be the best hand for the work."

"I'll get it out of her," Archer promised. "I know that look, though. Where are you headed?"

"A pretty blonde invited me for a drink," I told her. "Figured now as good a time as any."

"You're pulling my leg, you wench," she grinned.

"I speak no lie," I grinned back. "If I'm not here, then look for me in the rooms of the Prince of Brus."

Now, I'd never actually paid all that much attention to the arcane rules governing Proceran wine drinking so I had to wonder: which was it that went with asking a stranger to commit what was *technically* a spot of treason, a red or a white?

—

"And you say this liquor is called *aragh*?" Prince Frederic Goethal said, sounding delighted.

I made a mental note to order a raise for the Callowan quartermaster here who'd ensured there would be a decent reserve of Legions and Army liquors. The Taghreb drink was actually a favourite among even my countrymen these days, the taste for it having spread from the former Legions officers to the men and women they'd trained.

"Indeed," I replied. "I developed a taste for it when I trained at the War College. It was quite popular amongst the cadets there."

The Prince of Brus was no longer in armour, having instead traded it for a riot of silk in red and blue whose shape and cut somehow evoked wings splayed across the Proceran warrior-prince's chest. I availed myself of what was being displayed, namely some very nicely muscles on an otherwise slender body. The accompanying silken trousers were tight enough they made clear the calves under them were iron-hard, which they were very clearly meant to. Prince Frederic had been quite surprised by my unannounced visit but proved to be an amicable host, leading us to the little salon attached to his rooms and dismissing the servants so that we might speak alone.

"Ah, the famous War College," the blond mused. "I have heard many tales of it, most of them I suspect of being splendid lies."

He popped open the bottle and laid down the cork on the table between us — once again a low one between two sofas, the Proceran basics had very clearly been used as a standard for decoration across the Arsenal — before offering me a smile.

"Unless, Your Majesty, it is true that you once defeated an army with an exploding goat?"

I coughed.

"It was only a company, and the goats were part of a greater strategy," I confessed.

"Dear Gods," Frederic Goethal mused, "if I return home with word that Special Tribune Robber is not a complete and utter liar, the Morgentor itself might well fall over from the shock."

That little shit, I thought, not entirely angrily. A quarter of the continent away, and still he was finding ways to be a pain in my ass.

"Tell me he's not doing plays anymore, at least," I asked.

"Their all-goblin rendition of 'The Election of Blessed Clothor' saw several of my courtiers weep openly," the Prince of Brus cheerfully denied.

I noted he did not specify whether the weeping was at the beauty of it or the sheer horror. Truly, the man was a skilled diplomat. I gestured to offer to pour from the bottle and he conceded, rising instead to fetch two very crystal glasses with gold rims. Gods, I hoped those were his and not the Arsenal's. If my kingdom's taxes had ended up pitching for gold-rimmed glasses, someone on my side had been botching their job. I poured him a generous measure, and a smaller one for myself – I'd already had a few, after all. Besides, from what I recalled Proceran court etiquette dictated that women should drink daintier cups of strong spirits. Larger cups of wine, though, strangely enough. Something about men having stronger stomachs but women better palates.

"Prince Frederic," I began.

"Frederic," he insisted. "I've told you before, Your Majesty."

"Catherine, then," I replied.

It was a false closeness, this, but not one that was particularly unpleasant to me. I suspected that if I got to know this man, I might actually grow to like him.

"It would be my pleasure," the Prince of Brus smiled, perfect white teeth and stunning eyes taking me aback. "Might I offer a toast, Catherine? To the Grand Alliance!"

He raised his cup.

"To old enemies, and new friends," I replied, touching his glass with mine.

We both drank, and I noted with approval that he did not choke and his eyes did not water. It was always pleasing when a man knew how to hold his liquor. Our glasses touched the table, and the Prince of Brus leaned back.

"I believe," he said, "that I might have interrupted you. I offer apology, and willing ear."

I mulled over that a moment, choosing how the subject was to be broached,

"Are you fond of stories, Frederic?" I asked.

"A complicated question," the Prince of Brus said. "As a boy I would have mocked it, but I have learned better in the years that followed. It would be a lie to speak of like or dislike, perhaps. In the end I take stories to be much like the finest of paintings: a thousand men and women can look at the same and find different sight, yet none of them are entirely right or wrong."

"Ah," I mused, "but there lies the power of it all: for a thousand men and women, there was something there to be found."

"I have known the right truth to give a man wings, Catherine," Frederic Goethal quietly said. "I do not deny the power of stories."

"That is comforting to hear," I said. "Now, if I spoke of *intercession* to you, would the word mean anything?"

The Grand Alliance was aware of the Wandering Bard, the enigmatic Named that had not joined the Truce and Terms and could not be trusted – I would have had her known as a foe outright, but the Grey Pilgrim had been bitterly opposed. Knowledge of the Intercessor, though, was more sparse. I had shared much of what I knew with Cordelia Hasenbach, and in turn she had shared the insights of the Augur, but I did not know how broadly she had spread that knowledge. Considering Frederic Goethal was both a prince of Procer and Named, though, he struck me as likelier to be warned than most.

"It would," the man murmured. "Agnes Hasenbach is a woman of deep and painful wisdom, whose word I will not gainsay."

"Knowing both these things," I said, "do you understand how a ruler who is Named might sometimes act according to rules that are not the rules of Creation's shallows?"

I'd asked Vivienne about Prince Frederic Goethal, about his reputation in Procer, before he became Named. He'd garnered some interest from me since he was the only southern royal to have marched his armies north instead of south. The report had mentioned some things that were well-known, like the fact that he was wildly popular among Lycaonese as well as northwestern Alamans and apparently considered to be among the finest warriors and generals in Procer, as well as more discreet truths. He was considered to be one of Cordelia's fiercest loyalists and had once proposed to her, but within the Highest Assembly and

Proceran royalty at large he was considered rather indifferent to politics. He'd survived this long dealing with cutthroat princes though, I thought, so he wouldn't be slow on the uptake. In the highest reaches of Procer, even standing still required a great deal of cunning.

"The kind of action," Prince Frederic slowly said, "that an unenlightened observer might consider... harmful to one's position, I imagine. Yet most sensible according to a different set of rules."

Gods, but I did enjoy dealing with intelligent allies. It was always a treat not to have to drag people to the right conclusion kicking and screaming.

"I would not want a request for such an action," I said, "to be taken as having another, baser purpose."

"I am not blind to the corpses you have left behind you, Queen Catherine," the Prince of Brus softly said, "or to fell deeds done by your hands. But I also remember the stench on the fields of Aisne, and that men had never needed Below or Tower to make butchery of themselves. I also know that if it is the destruction of Procer that you sought, the most required of you was not to do a thing at all. We are allies, Catherine Foundling. If you need my help, I will do what I can."

I looked at him steadily and tried not to let out that I was actually rather impressed with the man. After a moment I cleared my throat.

"I'll be direct, then," I said. "I need you to break out the Red Axe from where she is currently being held, then protect her from what is coming."

"And what is it that is coming?" the Kingfisher Prince asked, eyes gone hard as steel.

"I cannot yet name it," I said, "but I know this: were stand atop a mound of sharpeners, and the death of the Red Axe is how the match is struck."

Chapter 20: Hook

"Fate is not the river but the fisherman: run wild as you will, it will reel you in before the end."

– Queen Edda Norland of Summerholm, shortly before the surrender of her crown to House Alban

I was a city girl at heart so hunting had never been something I thought all that fondly of.

Not that I hated it, either. Out in the country, away from walls and merchants, a good stag or a few geese were a good way for my people to feed their families. One that'd become increasingly common after the Conquest, actually: with the removal of most nobles in the kingdom, there were no longer great forests and fields reserved for the sole hunting right of aristocrats. The Empire had required a yearly fee in silver for the right to hunt in a governor's jurisdiction, but otherwise been largely indifferent to the practice. I'd maintained the policy, and why wouldn't I? It was a good way for my subjects to put meat on the table, especially those who might not have otherwise been able to afford it. But that'd been in the country, not in Laure.

There hunting had been a leisurely pursuit for the wealthy and the *noble*, practiced by great trains of riders and multiple packs of hounds. Sometimes the animals being hunted were not even edible: by ancient law foxes could not be hunted for sport in Callow, but wolves and bears could and frequently were. It'd been a great deal of pageantry and gold pissed away on reminding people that even under the rule of the Dread Empire the rich and highborn were still important and worthy of awe. The coin would have been better spent ensuring that the basins the street drains emptied in near Nelly's Alley didn't fill up after rain and so end up becoming an open-air sewer that stank up a good dozen city blocks like you wouldn't believe come summer sun, in my humble opinion, but what the Hells did I know?

I'd had them properly dug anew and done during my first year as queen, even though Ratface had howled about the costs.

Still, general distaste for the spectacle or not it'd been impossible not to pick up a few things about hunting being born in Callow. It wasn't as simple business as riding a swift horse after a stag and running it down with a spear, else highborn would not get to be so bloody pretentious about the whole thing. You had to tire out the beast, set dogs after it so it'd run itself to exhaustion. Only when it was on the edge of collapse would it turn and fight, antlers down as fear turned to despair, and only then was the kill to be made. If the nobles had gone after the stag themselves from the start, their horses would have tired out long before the stag would. I was after a beast of my own, here in the Arsenal, so I'd used a method not so dissimilar to that of my countrymen: to get the enemy running, I'd sent out a pack of baying hounds.

The Mirror Knight's band was even now chasing down a conspiracy to bring it into the light, though perhaps not the conspiracy they believed they were. They were a cacophonous bunch, but for all that I believed they'd be able to shake *something* loose. They certainly had the power and numbers for it: four heroes and the Maddened Keeper, with Adjutant to keep an eye on them and ensure they did not end up misusing the authority I'd granted them.

They'd begun their investigation with the Hunted Magician who, all things aside, we could all agree was a shifty fellow. Whether or not he'd been up to any sort of wickedness was not of too great import, as far as I was concerned: more crucial was that the heroes would be seen digging, and word would soon after spread it was with my blessing. There was someone in the Arsenal with something to hide, and ruby to piglets that little tale would get them moving. With such fine hounds out in the woods someone's never was going to crack, and they'd want to make sure their tracks were covered.

Following them should neatly reveal exactly what it was that was being covered up.

Mind you, the hand behind the opposition was not some ingrate prince with more greed than sense or a heroine fresh off her first nemesis' death and looking to sink her teeth into another victory: it was the Intercessor pulling the strings here. Just because she'd already struck blows didn't mean she was going to stop hitting me below the belt. If anything, it'd be the opposite. So I had to see to my own defences, which meant keeping the goblinfire away from any open flames. The Red Axe was a natural target there but seeing to her protection myself would make me directly involved in her death if it happened, which would be *considerably* worse than her simply dying. No, someone else needed to be charged with that else I was running into the risk that my personal involvement had been the desired object from the start.

The Kingfisher Prince was of high rank, popular with heroes and his word would mean a great deal to the likes of the Mirror Knight if he vouched for me. That he'd been demonstrably competent and receptive to the concept of the manner of war being fought over the Arsenal had sold me on the notion for good, and so off he went to see the Red Axe with a signed set of orders from me granting him permission to do so under the Terms. Gods help him, mine and maybe even Above if they were to share a win instead of pissing in the communal porridge bowl out of principle.

Now, it wouldn't be enough to simply wait and see now that the hunt had been sounded. Which was why Archer was hitting up her old acquaintance the Concocter for answers, a conversation that should end up with the latter spitting out a part of the Wandering Bard's design here. It had to have been a long-term scheme, I figured: the Red Axe and the Wicked Enchanter had been tools of opportunity, but the tools to use *them* had already been in place. The smuggling, the precise timing used to guide the Enchanter onto the path of the heroine that'd kill him? That'd been arranged long before, one of no doubt many levers to nudge along the happenings within the Arsenal. After that it was just a

matter of the Intercessor getting the right Named close enough, and she could get it all to begin rolling downhill.

The Concocter wouldn't know the whole web, I was aware of that: there should be at least one outright accomplice to the Bard in here, as well as several agents unwitting and not. But by dragging into the light what she knew, I could get a glimpse of what the levers were meant to accomplish. And once I knew that, well, I could smash the Intercessor's game to pieces with a sledgehammer and force her to swallow the broken shards with a smile. So there we were, I'd considered after the Kingfisher Prince had set off. The Mirror Knight's band were out there turning over primarily – one hoped, at least – stones, Archer was finding me a thread to tug at so the net might unravel and the charming Prince Frederic was making sure this wasn't about to violently turn on me.

Now, the Bard would see those stories in motion same as I did. The question was: if I was her, where would I strike at?

Setting the Mirror Knight after the Kingfisher would have been obvious, except my little letter and Frederic being trusted had cut that disaster off before it could start looming. The Concocter wasn't officially one of mine, but with what Indrani had told me about her I could easily unmake any attempt to claim that 'the Black Queen's agent was persecuting a heroine'. The Mirror Knight's band could be tricked I figured, even with Hakram keeping an eye on them, but there wasn't a lot that could physically threaten them. At this point I'd be willing to let them encounter an early setback without intervening, anyway, since that should ensure they later brutally crushed whoever had beat them this early in the pattern.

My trouble, right now, was that I could not see an easy way the arrows I'd loosed could be made to swerve. Out in the open the Intercessor couldn't beat me, because even if I was distrusted I was still recognized. A figure of authority, backed by other figures of authority. Yet Archer should be unearthing part of her machinations where I'd sent her, and using violence to prevent her of doing that would reveal part of the machinations as well: whoever struck at Indrani would be one of the Bard's trusted hands, and pumping them for information would be even more useful than shaking some insights out of the Concocter. There probably were ways to beat my hand, but I didn't know what they were and that meant I couldn't prepare for them. Or, at least, prepare in specific.

There was going to be an answer, and I would have to react to it. While I could not prepare for the specifics for the unknown, I could prepare *for* the unknown. Practically speaking, that meant assembling a team to handle whatever came crawling out of the woodworks on the Intercessor's behalf. Calling back anybody I'd

sent out would be a mistake, unmaking the story they were playing out, which meant if I was to gather some sort of bastard band of five I'd need to pick from the rest of the Arsenal's Named. Four comrades, huh? I could do that. First, I'd naturally needed a trusted second.

Thankfully I had a spare lying around.

—

"I've just had to put out a library fire," Roland of Beaumarais, also known as the Rogue Sorcerer, mildly told me as he washed his hands free of ash. "I don't suppose you'd know anything about that?"

"I know lots of things, Roland," I vaguely replied.

His hands left the now-clouded water of the basin and he methodically dried them with a cloth.

"Books, Catherine?" he said, sounding agonized. "Castles, armies, ancient architectural wonders, I can make my peace with them all. But *books*, Catherine? A line has to be drawn somewhere."

"If such a thing had been done, it would not have been done lightly," I said.

"You haven't even been here a whole day," he complained.

Actually, I mused, this could also work.

"You're right," I said. "I'm a reckless, dangerous woman who'll do anything to win."

He cocked his head to the side.

"Have you been drinking?" he asked.

Well, yes. But that was not related to this. I decided, for the sake of tactics, to ignore his rejoinder.

"Which is why you should come with me," I said. "Be the voice of reason, keep me out of trouble. Prevent me from burning more libraries."

A beat passed.

"Not that I've done that," I added.

Another beat passed.

"But hey, the day's young," I added with a hopeful smile.

He twitched a little. Still, under the harried exterior I could see something sharpen in his eyes. The understanding that none of this was as casual as it looked, or without calculation.

"The way Archer tells it, your last designated voice of reason once stole the entire sun," Roland said.

"She's still complaining we never got to pawn that off, isn't she?" I sighed.

"I expect sooner or later the litany will be put to verse," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "Still, large boots to fill."

He shrugged.

"I've nothing else planned for the day, however," he said. "So I supposed I might as well."

"That's exactly the kind of spirit I'm looking for," I said, clapping him on the shoulder. "Come, Roland, we have an important task ahead of us."

He shot me a steady look.

"I don't suppose you could tell me a little more, that I might equip myself accordingly?" he asked.

I hummed, then thoughtfully clasped my chin.

"We're going to cram as many potential traitors as possible into a band of five, then dabble into some stirring heroics," I replied.

"Ah," Roland of Beaumarais nonchalantly said. "We'll have to take a detour through the Workshop, then. It's where I keep my war artefacts."

Good man, I thought, and smiled.

—

"Her name is Adanna," Roland said as we walked, "and she was born, as she tells it, in Smyrna."

"It's got roots in Mtethwa," I noted. "Not a common Soninke name, though. You said she's highborn?"

"She certainly behaves like it," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "Though there is a distinct Ashuran bent to her manners."

"What colour are her eyes?" I asked.

"Golden," he replied. "It is quite unusual, even for a Chosen."

I let out a low whistle.

"That's not just highborn, that's from one of the old lines," I said.

Born in Smyrna, was she? It was one of the two cities of the Thalassocracy of Ashur, its capital. Hells, that must have been quite the tale. It would have been a point of pride for the Wasteland family they'd fled to have them assassinated, and old families like that tended to have a few grimoires' worth of nasty tricks to pull.

"She's made her disaster for the Dread Empire and all those who dwell within it quite clear," Roland said. "It has been one of the reasons she so frequently clashes with Hierophant."

Which was why Masego wouldn't be part of this band, among other things. I also wanted him free to be a source of knowledge and wisdom for any of the three stories I'd loosed, which he couldn't be if I was dragging him along for mine.

"Hierophant's not here," I said. "And she requested an audience with me, you said. We can have words as we move."

"I expect that was not quit what she wished for," Roland said, "but regardless, here we are."

That last part had not been an outburst of fatalism on the Blessed Artificer's behalf but instead Roland informing me we'd reached the Artificer's quarters in the Workshop. We'd already picked up the Rogue Sorcerer's artefacts, which were now stuffing his pockets and sleeves, and it'd not been a long walk from there. The bare stone hallways here were little different than anywhere else in the Arsenal, and though I would have enjoyed visiting the great workshops of *the Workshop* – birthplace of wonders that it was – there was no time for sightseeing. Instead we found ourselves in front of a neat wooden door, and without ceremony I knocked against it with my staff a few times. Mere moments later it was wrenched open to my surprise.

"I've told you already, I won't-"

Adanna of Smyrna, wearing small spectacles over her golden eyes and garbed in clothes I would have expected more of some kindly toymaker than a powerful Named, was visibly taken aback when she realized who it was standing at her door. Realizing that the Rogue Sorcerer was at my side did nothing to help he confusion.

"Good evening," I said. "I see that look on your face means I won't have to bother with introductions, Blessed Artificer."

"I am, yes," the dark-skinned woman said. "I know of you, Black Queen. And Roland as well."

"Splendid," I said. "I've need of your services for a bit, as it happens. I'll give you a moment to change and equip yourself."

"Equip myself?" the Blessed Artificer blinked. "For what?"

"Trouble," I vaguely said.

Yeah, looking more closely at her she had that highborn look down to the bone: quite literally, as those high cheekbones were one of those telltale marks of Soninke nobility. This Adanna of Smyrna had not quite inherited the inhuman good looks of Wasteland aristocracy, though she was far from ugly. I supposed having met Malicia in person and spent years in Akua's presence had rather skewed my standards when it came to beauty, anyway. She'd definitely not inherited the Wasteland social schooling, anyhow, as it took her a full three heartbeats before she recovered from the onrush of surprises.

"I do not recall agreeing to lend you my aid, Black Queen," the Artificer said, chin rising. "And if you believe that the Rogue Sorcerer's presence will be enough to bully me—"

"I do believe you've just indirectly called me a tool," Roland noted, though he sounded rather good-humoured about it.

"— into compliance then I assure you, you are sorely mistaken," the heroine finished.

She had that look about her, like a cat ready to hiss the moment a hand was extended, but then that in the first place she'd assume I would need Roland to bully anyone told me exactly how I needed to handle her.

"Please lend me your aid," I bluntly asked.

Ah, so she *had* been taught to hide her emotions some. She wasn't great at it — Gods, but they would have eaten her alive in Praes — but she did smooth out her surprise after a moment.

"It is for a noble purpose," Roland told her.

Noble might be a bit of a stretch, I mused, but did not contradict him.

"And you requested an audience, as I recall," I said. "We can see to some of that as we walk."

The golden-eyed Named hesitated.

"What is it you require of me, exactly?" she asked.

Gotcha, I smiled.

—

In what I hesitated to call a stroke of luck, given the amount of Named in the Arsenal, the last two Named I'd decided on were in the same place.

"You know I respect your judgement a great deal," Roland murmured, leaning towards me.

"People only ever say that sentence with a but implied," I said.

He shrugged, not denying me.

"This seems like it will make a terrible band of five," the Rogue Sorcerer assessed.

"Yes," I grinned, "just genuinely terrible, wouldn't it be?"

He cursed under his breath in what I recognized to be tradertalk.

"Last time I saw you that savagely enthusiastic, I was thrown off a balcony," he complained.

"If a villain throws you off it, it's really more of a cliff," I said, echoing an old foe.

One who'd deserved both better and worse than what she'd got, but that'd been the lesson of the Proceran campaign hadn't it? That I was not facing righteous steel things glinting of Light but people of flesh and blood, with all the complexities of character that implied. Though we'd been quiet in our little talk, we'd not been *that* quiet: the Blessed Artificer overheard, and was not shy in offering up her own assessments.

"One's useless, the other is *drunk* and useless," Adanna of Smyrna said.

Well, I couldn't deny the drunk part at least. The Arsenal held within its walls hundreds of people, who while they might not have been forced to come here had not been aware of exactly how long or *where* they would be. Given the concerns about the Dead King's inevitable interest in this place and the fact that relative secrecy was the Arsenal's best defence, we'd known from the beginning that people would only rarely be able to leave once they'd been brought into the fold. As a consequence, aside from what had been tacked onto the seat of Grand Alliance's research and artifact-crafting to fill its secondary role as a communication relay for rulers and high officers, thought had been given to the *entertainment* of all the men and women we'd cram into here possible for years on end.

That was the niche the Frolic was meant to fill, in essence. Accessible only through the central halls of the Knot – as well as a discreet tunnel coming from the Alcazar – that part of the Arsenal had been built as a sort of ring made up of diversions.

One section was essentially a sprawling tavern, another a private little brothel, a gaudy strip was a gambling house and there'd even been a fighting pit tacked on. Callowans and Procerans were fond of dogfights, but the more exotic beasts Levantines liked to throw into pits had been deemed too expensive and dangerous for consideration. Duels and brawls, though, were allowed. Only to first blood and with healers in attendance, but a few hundred people could not be squeezed in tight between walls for years without some fighting erupting.

Better to give a clear and controlled outlet for that strife than let it erupt out of sight, where there'd be no healers waiting.

What I was looking at, though, was not anger being settled with first blood. It was a crowd of maybe half a hundred cheering at one of the sloppiest fistfights I'd ever seen. The part of me that remembered fighting for coin in another pit was almost offended by how fucking terrible these people – these Named! – were at hand-to-hand combat. The three of us stood in the shadows of the entrance hall, looking down at the fighting pit and the rafter above it, and let the sound wash over us.

"Fallen," the crowd howled. "Fallen, Fallen, Fallen."

The Fallen Monk was one of Indrani's band, and one of the villains on our rolls that heroes tended to react the most violent to. That was not because his sins were so great compared to the rest of Below's lot, but because once upon a time he'd instead been known as the *Merry Monk*. A Proceran hero from their southern lands, whose very public fall from grace had been the talk of Salamans for year: it wasn't every day someone force-fed one of the Holies until her belly literally burst. Archer counted him as better at sneaking around than Vivienne had been back in the day, and good as a bloodhound when something needed to be found in a town. When it came to fighting, though, aside from being able to take some punishment and being quite useful against Light-users she'd never considered him anything all that special for a Named.

Fortunately for the overweight and very clearly drunk middle-aged man in cloth robes, his opponent was even worse a brawler.

The Exalted Poet's face paint, which had been a neat affair of black and red when I first saw him today, and since been damaged by a purpling black eye and an amount of sand that really could only have come from having his entire face *shoved* into it. His lack of shirt made it clear that they made them muscled in the Dominion, but for all that he was built like a warrior he certainly wasn't performing like one: the punch he threw at the Fallen Monk's face was met with a mirror on the other side, the two of them rocking back when they hit each other. The Monk stayed up though, if rocking on his feet, while the Poet took a dive and had to hastily push off the sandy ground of the fighting

circle before he could get kicked in the ribs by the fat fallen priest. By the amount of empty bottles the audience had carelessly left around in the stands, they must have been at this for some time now.

"It is written in the Book of All Things," the Fallen Monk shouted red-cheeked for the audience, "that those who are worthy of the love of the Heavens will be blessed with their golden love. Bless me, you mighty asses!"

The watchers cheered on, and someone threw a wineskin at the villain for what was evidently not the first time this afternoon. The former priest guzzled down what looked like some pale wine, even as the Exalted Poet got back on his feet and charged – even when tackled in the belly, the Monk kept drinking as he went down.

"They are perfect," I solemnly announced. "Exactly what I was looking for."

"It cannot be that hard to find a fool and an idiot," the Blessed Artificer replied.

"The Monk has a body count of over a hundred, as I hear it," Roland noted. "Though I suspect close quarters were not involved."

Actually, the more I watched those two the less I was convinced that he was right. Sure, the Monk stumbled around a lot and got tackled and took punches. Yet, almost as if by happenstance, never at an angle that'd hurt him much: bruises might ensue, but little more. Either was damned good at taking hits, or he was a better fighter than what he was letting on here.

"If I fetch them myself, Black Queen, can we then proceed to more important matters?" the Blessed Artificer asked me. "You have yet to hear the complaint I mean to lodge."

Somehow, I suspected that if I let her handle that we'd not have five Named up here but three down there. Roland suddenly stiffened, which caught my attention, and he discreetly gestured to our common right – though somewhat behind me. Up there, sitting on a bench and leaning back against the wall, another Named was reading a book. Sallow-skinned and thin-haired, the Sinister Physician had always looked to me like the last person you'd ever want to let cut you open. His skills as a healer were beyond dispute, though, if not his occasional indulgence in taking vitality or souls as payment or even his clear obsession with immortality.

"They've observed the rules, then," I murmured at Roland. "They're meant to have a healer at hand."

I saw no need to seek the other villain out, as it happened. I'd not come for him. But that he was here, though, was interesting: at the very least, it meant he wasn't *elsewhere*. At first glance anyway.

"Check if it's an illusion," I told the Rogue Sorcerer.
"Discreetly."

"You are ignoring me, Black Queen," the Blessed Artificer impatiently said. "If that is all you sought me out for—"

"I'll see to it myself, Artificer," I replied.

Her open irritation I didn't particularly care about, or even the threat to leave she'd obviously been building up to. I knew an empty threat when I heard one: for all that the heroine at the very least disliked me and had some axes to grind with Roland, she was too curious about where this was headed to leave now. I'd not missed her constant not-quite-subtle glances at my staff, either. While it was my understanding that Light and miracles were her wheelhouse and the length of yew I'd retrieved from the heart of Twilight after its birth was not exactly either, neither was it simply a staff. And as there was no sorcery at the heart of that difference, perhaps her interest in that undefined otherness should have been expected. A halfway clever Named could do a lot, with the undefined.

"So?" I pressed the Rogue Sorcerer.

He released what he'd been clutching in one of his pockets, breathing out.

"Not an illusion," he confirmed.

Good, that was one more Named accounted for. Time for me to get bring in our last two comrades, then. The audience that'd been cheering for the two brawling Named all the while had not noticed the three of us, as we'd stayed in the shadows of the hall, but when I began to limp down the stairs a few caught sight of me. My face might not have been all that recognizable, but even this bare a crown and the Mantle of Woe were enough for exclamations of Black Queen to shiver through the crowd. I ignored the attention and made my way to the edge of the pit, looking down at the two Named whose brawling had ceased when silence spread. I flicked a look at the people up here.

"Dismissed," I said, voice ringing.

Not one argued otherwise, and they filed out with a rather subdued mood hanging over them. Of the two Named below, only the Exalted Poet looked embarrassed at having been caught slugging it out in the sand with a stranger.

"Your Majesty," the Fallen Monk jovially greeted me, his Lower Miezan crisp and perfect, "a pleasure to meet you in person."

He raised a wineskin, not even the same one I'd seen thrown at him earlier.

"I hear from a common friend you're partial to the pales, so it would be my honour to surrender this triumphant bounty to you," he continued.

I snorted.

"Tempting," I said, "but I've had enough to drink for a while. I'm here to inform you that Archer has lost you to me at cards."

The middle-aged man cocked an almost incongruously delicate eyebrow.

"On a good hand at least, I hope," he said.

"Half a good hand," I said, then added, "seen double."

That startled a laugh out of him.

"I am in your service for the day, then," the Fallen Monk bowed, adroit for all his impressive girth. "Though I cannot think of what you might require an old priest like me for."

"You'd be surprised," I said, and turned my stare to the Exalted Poet.

Sadly enough, he'd put a shirt on again. He bowed very graciously, though, so I'd allow it.

"We meet again, Black Queen," the Levantine hero said.

Yeah, that voice was still like getting honey poured in my ear – and drawing on Night just the slightest bit ensured there was no sorcery adding on to the impression this time.

"So we do," I replied. "As it happens, our common acquaintance the Monk was not the only man I am here to look for. I've a need for your particular skills."

"Indeed?" the Poet replied, sounding surprised. "I am most flattered, Honoured Queen, yet also befuddled. What is it you might need them *for*?"

I reached for my pipe, in the inner pockets of my cloak, and took it in hand while I went fishing for a packet of wakeleaf. I was about to tear it open, when a tremor went through the Arsenal. A second happened a moment later, stronger, and I felt the very stone around us shiver. *You horrid wench*, I thought towards the Bard, *you could have waited until I actually lit the damned pipe.*

"Don't you hate it when a question answers itself?" I said, matching the Exalted Poet's eyes.

I had my answer about how it was the Intercessor would avoid the story arrows I'd loosed at her, at least.

If you couldn't move the arrows, I supposed instead you could move *everything else*.

Chapter 21: Line

"Turn back, Emperor, for if you venture further west the sole stretch of land you'll have of me will be six feet long and three feet deep."

– King Jehan the Wise, before the famous Battle of the Sparrows

I tapped the side of my pipe, seeding flame, and drew in a long breath of wakeleaf.

It was a good gambit, I decided as the Arsenal shuddered again. Shuddered like a wall taking trebuchet fire, like a gate being touched by the ram: someone, something was trying to force its way in. An obvious outside threat would draw in the Mirror Knight and his lot like a moth to the flame, and in the ensuing chaos a move could be made against either Archer or the Kingfisher Prince. Hells, if the mess got big enough a ruthless schemer like the Intercessor might just be intending to tie up all her loose ends through casualties. My choices in giving answer were limited, each an opportunity I could not easily discard. Fighting at the Mirror Knight's side now might earn trust I'd need down the line, but intercepting enemy action headed for Archer or Prince Frederic would pay greater and more immediate dividends. I breathed out the smoke and offered a calm glance at the Named assembled around me before turning to the side.

"Sinister Physician," I called out.

The man had closed his book and risen to his feet the moment the first shiver went through the stone around us, but aside from a small bow to me he'd shown no interest in being involved with this situation.

"My queen," the villain replied, turning and indifferent gaze on me. "How may I serve?"

"Head out to the Knot and prepare to receive wounded," I ordered. "Set up a temporary infirmary. You have my full backing to requisition whatever you might need."

A glint of interest appeared at that, though not particularly deep. Still, unpleasant as the man was he'd be able to handle this without trouble. The Knot was the centre of the Arsenal, a

mess of winding hallways, but it would have the benefits of being accessible no matter where the enemy struck from and being some distance from the fighting itself: it struck me as the best location to set up our healers.

"It shall be done," the Sinister Physician said. "If I might take my leave?"

"Do," I replied. "As for the rest of you, we'll be headed elsewhere."

So, should I see to the front door or the back? I mused. Either way I'd be taking a risk. Hells, given who I was up against it might be that there was simply no good decision to be made here. Perhaps instead of thinking in terms of avoiding mistakes, I should be thinking in term of picking the mistake whose consequences I could deal with more ably. No, that was still playing the Bard's game. Getting stuck in a story, digging in my heels. A defensive mindset would inevitably lead to my loss when facing an opponent whose understanding of the terrain was superior to my own. I'd already sent out Archer and the Kingfisher Prince, I must now trust in their skills. Where could I *attack*?

"A defence must be organized," the Blessed Artificer seriously said.

"Catherine?" Roland asked, eyes meeting mine.

He'd always been a sharp one. He must suspect by now we were fighting on more than one front and that I'd gathered this band of five as much to make sure it wasn't out of my sight as to make us of it. *Which means heading into a fight wouldn't necessarily be the best move*, I thought, but then breathed in sharply. Not, I corrected myself, it absolutely would be the best move. Sure, as a fighting band we'd be highly dysfunctional at best: both the Exalted Poet and the Fallen Monk would be better against people than the sort of things we were likely to face, and the Blessed Artificer wasn't a frontline Named. Furthermore, while the Rogue Sorcerer and I were both forces to reckon with, neither of us were in the habit of being in the thick of it these days. We'd grown used to relying on martial Names to take the frontline. But that only mattered if the objective of the fight was victory, which it wouldn't be here.

If any of these people had served or were serving as agents of the Intercessor, given the stories we had unfolding they were likely to be very difficult to kill even when by common sense they should be thrice-dead and buried. Creation would nudge things to help them might survive, so that in the last act of the play they could be unmasked by the triumphant heroes. The quickest way to ferret out an answer, I thought, would actually be taking this bunch into a fight far beyond what such a

purposefully shoddy band of five would be able to handle. Good, I mused as I breathed in wakleaf and smiled, that meant I could attack and defend with the same stroke. I spat out the smoke, Roland batting it away so it wouldn't linger near his face.

"This is a distraction," I said. "We need to intercept the enemy before they get what they came for. Roland, which would you believe the most likely target for destruction among our potential war assets?"

He grimaced.

"Either the Severance or that one theoretical exercise," the Rogue Sorcerer said after a beat. "I'll add that the former is significantly better defended."

So either the weapon that might possibly end the Dead King or the first steps of Quartered Seasons. The aspect I'd taken out of the Saint of Swords' corpse and which had since been forged into a sword was unique, and thus would be irreplaceable if lost. The other was technically recoverable, since while losing Masego's set up here in the Arsenal would set us back some months the truly important part was the surveying artefacts we'd seeded across several realms. It'd be a pain to re-establish connections with those again, but hardly impossible. Of those two tools it was my opinion that only Quartered Seasons' ultimate results would feasibly be able to harm the Intercessor, but that didn't necessarily mean that was what she'd be going for. The Dead King had implied, back at the conference in Salia, that some aspect of the Intercessor's plans hinged on the corpse of Judgement the Procerans had dredged up being used.

I'd worked on Hasenbach enough that I knew she'd not pull that trigger without having no other option left, so I had to wonder if that was the Bard's game: peeling away every other alternative, until that was left was oblivion's approach and a finger on the trigger.

"The sword is in the Repository," I said. "The other is..."

"Belfry," Roland said.

Masego's quarters in that part of the Arsenal, then. He'd never quite understood why anyone would separate their life from their work, as he saw little difference between the two.

"And for those of us slower to catch on," the Fallen Monk cheerfully said, "might an explanation be provided?"

The Exalted Poet cleared his throat in support.

"Please," he politely added.

"Isn't it obvious?" the Blessed Artificer sighed. "They believe someone's making a grab for the most dangerous projects in the Arsenal: the Severity and the Hierophant's own private research."

Wait, had she called the sword the Severity? From what Roland had said, I'd thought it was the Severance. Didn't matter, I decided. Especially not given what she was trying to pull here.

"That research is secret by the order of more crowns than any of you can afford to defy," I mildly said. "Do have a care about those loose lips, Artificer."

"Light ever cleanses," the Blessed Artificer replied, uncowed. "Those who have nothing to hide have nothing to fear."

"I must have been unclear," I patiently said, "if you ever talk of that subject again, within the hour I'll have an order signed by every high officer of the Grand Alliance to have you executed without trial or appeal. You have absolutely no idea what you're trifling with, and your ignorant swaggering is a potential existential threat to this continent. Congratulations, Blessed Artificer. There aren't a lot of people alive who've had *apocalypse* counted as a possible consequence of their blind arrogance."

Adanna of Smyrna reared back like I'd slapped her across the face, which to be fair I essentially had. I did not regret it, for I had rather limited patience for unearned self-importance these days. Especially from heroes.

"I," she said, "I didn't-"

"Think?" I coolly replied. "Consider this matter with a thimble's worth of commonsense? Evidently not."

Harsh as I might have been right now, there had been ways to handle this other than sneaking around investigating and then trying to force my hand by talking about it publicly. If she'd brought her concerns to the White Knight earlier, or Hells even to the First Prince, then this could all have been dealt with by the mechanisms we'd put in place for that very purpose. Instead she'd blundered onwards, heroine to the bone, and become yet another ingredient in the poisonous brew the Bard was trying to pour down my throat. My gaze swept across the rest of the gathered Named.

"I expect I won't have to repeat myself," I added.

"Already forgotten," the Fallen Monk said, raising his wineskin.

"My Chantant is lacking at the best of times," the Exalted Poet said.

Roland said nothing, only inclining his head. He didn't know the specifics of what Masego was looking into, since there was no need to, but he'd been made aware since the beginning that if Hierophant required time to spend on Quartered Seasons instead of other duties he was always to be granted that request.

"Good," I said. "Now, let's get moving. The moment we've ascertained where the breach will happen, we'll-"

There are limits, Bard, I thought even as the Arsenal shuddered once more and then a massive cracking noise sounded as the wards were broken through, *to having a nasty sense of humour.* My senses weren't anywhere sharp enough to tell me where the breach had taken place, but then I was far from the Crows and surrounded by wards. Someone who'd helped put those up, though, would have a better idea.

"Roland?" I asked.

"West," the Rogue Sorcerer replied. "Near the Belfry and the Workshop."

Opposite of where we were, unfortunately.

"Then to the Belfry we go," I ordered. "Prepare yourselves, my friends. This could get interesting."

—

I let Roland see to the Artificer's rustled feathers while we moved, the two of them taking the lead as we sped through the halls as quickly as we could. I wove Night through my leg to numb the pain so I wouldn't slow us down too much, but even so I had to stay in the back with the Fallen Monk and the Exalted Poet. I didn't mind, since it was as good an occasion as any to get them talking.

"So I heard you killed one of the Holies," I told the Monk. "In a pretty grisly way, too."

The villain laughed. There'd been no deep emotional reaction to the mention, not on his face anyway, and his weight made it more difficult to gauge his body language. Especially in such thick robes when it was a man I did not know well.

"You refer to my first, though not my last," he fondly said, Arlesite accent thickening slightly. "I got my hands on three before the Saint of Swords began popping up around the region and I had to flee. I slipped into the Dominion through the Brocelian Forest, and I'd made it as far as Levante when the war up north erupted."

Ah, I thought. So that how he'd survived as a villain west of the Whitecaps contemporary to the Saint and the Grey Pilgrim. I knew for a fact the House of Light in Procer had records on both, he might just have been keeping an eye out for them from the start.

"I heard rumours," the Exalted Poet said, a little too casually to be casual, "that around this time, several lodges of Lanterns disappeared after venturing into the Brocelian."

The Fallen Monk smiled, friendly as a beloved brother, but there was something about him... there was nothing comical about his weight then, his size and lumbering demeanour. It was like looking at a predator that'd gotten large and slow by devouring, feeding again and again until it weighed him down.

"Does the Book of All Things not preach that the righteous must answer kindness with kindness and wickedness with wrath?" the Monk pleasantly said.

The Poet stiffened.

"That is blasphemy," he hissed.

"To quote the Book of All Things?" the Monk chuckled. "What interesting practices the Dominion keeps to, if that is indeed true."

It was always nice, I thought, when Named made friends. If only it weren't so fucking rare.

"Can't cast stones, I suppose," I noted, "I was proclaimed an abomination for a few years, and Arch-heretic of the East for a tad shorter. What did they do to piss you off, anyway?"

"They called themselves holy," the Fallen Monk said. "That was, all things considered, more than enough."

"A Proceran priest is still a Proceran, after all," the Exalted Poet conceded.

In a sense, was ragging on the Principate not the foundation of international diplomacy? It'd yet to fail me, anyway, not even with actual Procerans.

"Can't argue with that," I snorted. "Mind you, Hasenbach seems to be cleaning house there."

She'd named some kind of spy lay brother her Lord Inquisitor with the coup attempt as a pretext then used him to rip out the fangs of the House in the Principate, the way the Jacks told it. She'd even done it carefully enough they'd had to just lie back and take it, which was damned impressive given the pull the House of Light still had in Procer even after their leaders got caught backing a coup.

"A cleaned pigsty does not become a temple for the cleaning," the Fallen Monk shrugged. "Though I suppose peeling some jewels off the pigs is laudable work."

Godsdamn, I thought, reluctantly impressed. This one would get along splendidly with the House Insurgent if they ever got introduced.

"Lanterns know better," the Exalted Poet proudly said. "They have a single lodge in Levante, and it does not involve itself with politics."

And if you believe that, there's a house in Hannover I'd like to sell you, I thought. The Lanterns had kept themselves from being squeezed under any ruler's thumb since the founding of Levant, and that wasn't the sort of thing that could be done by keeping your hands entirely clean.

"Right," I said, keeping my skepticism off my face, "you lived there, didn't you? As one of the Hidden Poets."

The man looked surprised at even this bare bone knowledge of him, though perhaps I should not be surprised by that in turn. We had never met in person until today, and as both a recent addition to our roster and one without impressive martial skills he'd warranted precious little attention from me.

"That is true," he said. "Though I am one of them no longer, as I have left the Old Palace and taken up paying work."

"I heard of the Hidden Poets claiming an entire street's worth of brothels for their use a full day and night, when I was there," the Fallen Monk slyly said. "Though no doubt that was mere vile calumny."

"No," the Exalted Poet assured him, "it is quite true. It happens every spring, as part of the Feast of Many Sighs."

Why was it that all these southern nations seemed to have those delightful customs involving a lot of beautiful naked people, when all that Callow could measure up against them was harvest festivals where everyone got drunk and made poor decisions? It was a little unfair, in my opinion. Anyhow, the Monk had been trying to tease by relying on a cultural need for discretion in such affairs that was very Proceran in the first place. Levantines, though, were remarkably forthright about sex even by my own Callowan standards.

"So what is it that moved you to leave the Old Palace?" I asked. "Sounds like a pleasant enough life."

"It would have been shameful to remain there as Bestowed," the Exalted Poet said, "given the call to war by the Holy Seljun. Besides, I have been thinking of composing an anthem of my own."

Bold, that. If I grasped what he'd said correctly, he was referring to the Anthem of Smoke: the founding epic of the Dominion of Levant, verses recounting the legendary hero-led rebellion that'd thrown out Procer and created the nation that still stood today. Mhm. This little chat had done nothing to move me towards believing those two were or were not pawns of the Intercessor, unfortunately. The Fallen Monk's fairly open hatred of the Proceran House of Light didn't necessarily make him an ally, since it wouldn't be impossible to use the Dead King as a way to break it without breaking Calernia itself along with it. If you had the right ally, anyway. Obviously he wasn't shy about getting a little blood on his hands or even killing to make a point, but then he wasn't one of Hanno's. My lot rarely had clean hands to show.

As for the Poet, he remained opaque to me. The Dominion's distinct fondness for honour and debts meant their Named had obvious levers for the Intercessor to use, but he did not seem quite as stuck in that rut as most of his countrymen: he'd backed down instead of dug in, when I'd pushed against the Mirror Knight's band right after its unexpected arrival. In a sense that only made him harder to read, though, and considering how straightforward Dominion Named tended to be that had me warier of him than not. I knew myself to be a fair hand at assessing people, it was a skill that'd saved my life more than a few times, but I had too little to go on here. For both of them. Until I got a finger on the pulse of what it was that drove, distrust was the order of the day.

Nothing new in that, sadly enough.

The Belfry was one of the more unusual parts of the Arsenal, in the sense that its existence was only possible because of the peculiarities of this place. In one sense it was exactly what it'd been named after: a belfry tower as could be seen in most temples of the House of Light, if a particularly large one. There could be no such thing as a view of outside in the Arsenal, though, as there *was* no outside. The pocket dimension this place was built in was very precisely tailored to what had been needed, as anything more would have been a waste of resources. To put it simply, the entire facility had been carved out from the interior of single stolen Arcadian mountain, using existing caves that were now the Knot as the start. It accounted for strange, sprawling and yet stratified lay of the Arsenal, which had been designed in a way that would have been absurd in a place not surrounded by stone on all sides.

We'd reached the broadly square base of the Belfry a while back, and been greeted by the first sight of the Arsenal I'd really consider to be worthy of story: where in a temple's belfry there would have been an empty hollow for the rope and bell, instead hung a long sculpted stalactite of what might once have been stone but was now quite different. The material had grown translucent from the sorcery poured into it, almost like a sort of crystal, and it offered a gentle glow that I recognized from some of the magelights in the rest of the Arsenal. Fourteen floors of a great library swept upwards around the former stalactite, which now hung more like a chandelier than anything else. It was the single greatest repository of books in this Arsenal, but the lay of the stacks also filled with writing desks and research nooks and even places to sleep. A few discreet hallways on different levels even led into personal quarters carved outwards from the Belfry, one of them Masego's. The stone railings on every floor parted to allow for a stone path leading into the crystalline hanging hear, which itself had been hollowed out and could serve as both stairs upwards and way across.

The truly beautiful part, though, was the lights and sights echoing within the translucent stone. They were not from here, as it happened. Though the Belfry's tallest heights reached the summit of the mountain the Arsenal had been carved in, there would simply have been nothing to see outside the windows. Just an endless void which had been described to me as desolately empty yet somehow oppressive, like a ceiling too close to one's face. It was the kind of thing that chipped away at one's sanity if looked at long enough, regardless, so the 'windows' at the highest ring of the Belfry instead showed something entirely different: they were great silver scrying mirrors looking instead at the beautiful vistas of Arcadia and the Twilight Ways, at the seas and sky of Creation. There were smaller mirrors on lower levels showing such sights as well, all of them angled so that what they held within might echo in the central stalactite.

It was genuinely wondrous to behold, and I'd cast more than a few looks to the side in fascination even as we went up the first floor and onto the second. Masego's quarters would be on the thirteenth floor, and they were where the enemy was most likely to strike, so I'd been prepared for the long hike up. My steps slowed before we could even come close to the third floor, however, same as Roland's in front of us. I cocked my head to the side, strengthening my senses with Night. The entire Arsenal was walled in by wards and had been raised in a pocket dimensions created and maintained by sorcery, which permeated the air and made sensing anything but the ambient power a difficult task, but the both of us had recognized a twinkle of what was coming up behind us.

"Enemies," Roland said. "It seems we arrived first."

"Fae," I added. "And if I can feel them from this far out, in this place? They're titled."

Not a weak title, either, which meant this was going to get rough. My otherworldly senses were too muddled by the surroundings for me to be able to put a finger on exactly what manner of fae was headed our way, but there could be no *good* answer to that sort of question.

"We should make our stand at the stairs leading up from the first floor," the Exalted Poet suggested, sounding rather enthusiastic. "Hold the line there."

"It'd be pointless," I grunted.

Roland nodded in agreement. I wasn't sure if he'd tangled with fae before, but at the very least he'd been in a few scraps with the Tyrant of Helike and his bloody gargoyles. The lessons to learn were not entirely dissimilar.

"Ah," the Blessed Artificer breathed out, quick to catch on. "They fly, the stories say."

Everyone's eye's turn to the empty space between the central crystalline structure and the railings. If they could go right up flying where we could only go on foot, they'd make it to Masego's quarters long before we did. Assuming they knew where those were, and that was truly where they were headed for. Wasn't a risk I could afford to take, regardless.

"Rogue Sorcerer," I said. "Head in there, find a good vantage and try to keep them from going straight up. I'm leaving."

The Blessed Artificer? Not a fighter, but potentially bearing useful tools to clear out a swarm of lesser fae. Dangerous for the same reason, though. The Fallen Monk would be next to useless save as a bodyguard – and couldn't be trusted for that anyway – while I knew much too little about the Exalted Poet's combat abilities. He had the Gift, though, and unless you were cooking up a ritual putting all your mages in the same basket was typically a bad idea.

"- the Blessed Artificer with you," I said.

She was the most likely to be able to crack open the wards Hierophant would put around his quarters, if she was the traitor. Roland already knew I'd gathered potential traitors here, so he'd know to both keep her at hand and keep an eye out for a knife in the back.

"Understood," the Rogue Sorcerer replied, catching my gaze and dipping his head.

I did enjoy working with Roland, no two ways about it.

"I will do what must be done," the Blessed Artificer grimly said.

Fair enough, I thought, so long as that didn't involve a knife slipped between mine or the Rogue Sorcerer's ribs.

"And the three of us, Black Queen?" the Fallen Monk asked me, a theatrical gesture extending the question to include the Poet.

"You two should run down to the entrance as quick as you can, we'll contain what we can there," I said.

"You will not be coming with us?" the Exalted Poet asked.

"I'll be taking another way down," I said. "Get moving, would you? There's no time to waste."

Though I could tell neither of them were convinced, they didn't manage to talk themselves into asking about it either. Keeping a good distance from each other, as if making a point of it, they doubled back at a run towards the stairs we'd taken up to get here. As for me, I waved off Roland and the Artificer and went fishing for my pipe again. I'd not finished the wakeleaf from earlier and it had gone quite cold, but a touch of blackflame saw to that. I limped my way to the railings and propped up my staff against them, leaning forward as I pulled at my pipe. A stream of smoke left my lips as I waited, patient, for the enemy's first blow. Unlike what I assumed to be the rest of this little band, I was familiar with fighting the Courts. Though Winter and Summer had preferred very different tactics, they'd had a few in common. There were, I imagined, only so many ways to make use of similar assets.

Which was I was not surprised when, before either the Named I'd sent down could make it down to the entrance, a winged silhouette shot out of the floor below and began to ascend the gap at a breakneck pace. A titled vanguard, hard enough to take a few hits from a powerful foe but not so powerful it'd be a great loss if their heads got caved in early. Classic fae, that.

"Not a prince or a duke," I mused, gauging the amount of power wafting out of the humanoid shape. "A count or a baron?"

Hard to tell, but I'd be more inclined to bet on baron. Regardless, it was time to act. I snatched up my staff and used it to deftly pull myself atop the railing, calling on Night and beginning to weave it even as I estimated the right angle. I leapt down, pitch-black power beginning to erupt from the top of my yew staff and hurtled down towards the fae heading up. It could see it – no, her. Decked in dark brown armour styled like a coat of branches, translucent wings batting as her long golden hair flowed behind her, the fae offered me a mocking smile even

as she veered off to the side and avoided me entirely. Leaving me, without a word or care, to fall towards the ground.

"Mistake," I noted around the mouth of my pipe.

Taking my staff up by both hands I snapped it forward like a fishing rod , and so the rope of Night I had woven snapped forward as well, snatching the fae passing me by the neck and smashing her down.

"How dare-"

The golden-haired fae passed me as I continued to fall down in a descent barely slowed, mouth open to scream in anger, but I took a hand off my staff and pulled at the Night-rope. It tightened around her throat and I dragged her close even as my teeth clenched around my pipe, then gripped her throat and forced her further beneath me. Using my staff as support I shot a painful jolt of Night into her body, disrupting her wings, and used her twitch of pain to flip her around. We kept falling, but I was now above her back and holding a makeshift rein of Night to guide our descent.

"- am the-" the fae forced out before I tightened the rope again.

I eye the rapidly approaching ground beneath us, counting in my head how long we had before impact and disrupting her wings with further jolts of Night another two times as we dropped. Only when we were a mere count of two from the ground did I allow her wings to form again, and our descent to slow as I impacted her back from the gathered momentum and she swivelled down and forward a bit before stabilizing. We were a mere six feet above the ground, and in the hallway in front of us what looked like a raiding party of fae were fast approaching. Best to finish this before they got close.

I laid a hand on the Night leash and poured further power into it, turning rope to flame, and with a twist of will sent it to eagerly devour the fae's throat. The neck turned to ash in an instant, the head plopping down unmoored and the wings winking out. The corpse dropped below and as the Mantle of Woe fluttered around me I adjusted my fall, landing on my feet a heartbeat after the corpse did – the head hit the ground a moment later with a wet sound, rolling half a foot towards me by happenstance. I brought to a halt with my boot, taking a last inhale of wakeleaf before all that was left was ash, and with my foot angled the fae's head so that I could empty my pipe into the silently screaming mouth.

I put it away after, smoothed my cloak and turned a winning smile into the incoming fairies even as the Fallen Monk and the Exalted Poet emerged from the stairs to my right.

I blew out the smoke, let it wreath my face as the fae emerged from the shadows of the hall.

"Good evening," I said. "I can't help but notice you've taken something of a wrong turn. Do you need some help in finding the way out?"

I'll take that as a no, I decided as a raging thunderstorm erupted in answer.

Chapter 22: Sinker

"Know mercy for what it is: the plea of the ant to the boot."

– Queen Elizabeth Alban of Callow

They were a lovely sight, in that terribly foreign way that was the mark of the fae.

Seven of the Fair Folk attacked under cover a rain and thunder, each of them some painter's wild dream made into flesh. The vanguard came as a matching pair, swift in their stride and a pleasure for the eye to behold: their skin like honey and their eyes a pale grey, they wore cuirasses and vambraces of copper so perfectly burnished they looked like the surface of a still pond. Beneath those a long robe ending in skirts had been woven of dead grass in grey and yellow, the colours perfectly matching those of their long and flowing hair. Each bore a single long blade, fashioned whole from what seemed like a single strand of dead grass – the straight edges of the blades crooned as they touched the winds, though, as if they were so keen even the storm was cut by their touch. They were titled, both of them. I could feel it. Yet they were not among the greats of whatever Court had sent them, servants of higher powers.

One such power stood behind them. Towering in height but slender in his build, the fae was a splendid sight: an armoured and tunic of woven brass and bright-red flame, glittering with rubies, went down to his thighs, loose and long-sleeved. Below, long skirts that were a netting of gold filled with brass yet as supple as cloth swung over black-skinned bare feet. What little skin was left bare by the slender helm of brass and smouldering charcoal, its long cheek guards of carved red opal going down to a round collar of gold touched with flickering embers, was just as dark in tone. As if the two burning red eyes set in the elegant face had charred the fae entirely, I thought. In his right hand was held a rounded kite shield, woven together from frozen bright-red fire, while in his left he held a bastard sword hilted in gold and ruby but whose blade was pitch-black and smouldering.

I caught sight of the last four, before the storm swept over me, but only glimpses. A tall woman bearing a great antlered helm, or perhaps antlers, face painted with streaks of blood-red and bone-

white as she wielded a spear of twisted bone. A small figure, almost childlike, trailing long strands of straw like a dress or a cape and whisper-swift on its feet. A calm-faced man wearing a strangely nostalgic smile, sprouts of green twisting around him like a bandolier and a quiver. And behind them all, an amber-eyed woman with a sizzling grin, messy hair swept around by the wind as lightning crackled up her frame and she guided the storm. That one was the most powerful among them, I sensed, and if she was not at least a Duchess I would eat my own hand. There was no time to consider that in depth, though, for the wind and rain and lightning hit me like someone had thrown a damned wall at me.

I took half a step back, cursing, and had to shift my weight so I wouldn't be outright blown off. My mantle flapped like a banner behind me, and I dragged my crown down on my brow so it wouldn't fly off. This wouldn't do, I couldn't see a bloody thing in this wind and rain and –

"Bordel de merde," I swore in Chantant, throwing myself to the side even as lightning struck.

It still singed the edge of my face, and I grimaced at the burning of my skin. My hair might well have caught fire, if not for the rain. I rolled up into a kneel and drew deep of the Night as I brought up my staff, only to smash it down on the stone. The thing with Night was that, for all its wondrous flexibility, it tended to fare pretty badly in straight-up fights against other powers. Light most of all, but sorcery tended to come out on top as well and I suspected that the work of the fae would behave just the same. Night was the power of a thief, not a soldier, and always shone best when there was no struggle to be had. Which was why even though these days I probably had as much raw might to throw around as my current opponent, if not more, I did not try to unmake the storm. Instead a bursting bubble of darkness spreading out created an oasis of calm within it before fading but leaving the boundary maintained. I rose gingerly to my feet.

"Come now," I said. "If I know a single thing about the likes of you lot, it's that you literally *cannot* refuse an invitation like this. Don't be so coy, my lords and ladies."

A rich chuckle answered me as the dark-skinned fae that wore flame like cloth strode out of the storm in front of me, bare feet not even a whisper against the stone. His sword stayed pointing at the ground, his shield loose in his grip.

"It is my honour to make your acquaintance, Queen of Lost and Found," the burning-eyed fae said. "Your cavalier grave-robbing of Winter is legend among our kind."

Distraction, I mused. He might as well have it carved into his forehead – which meant the twins were either about to flank me or already using the storm as cover to burst out and make a run at

Masego's quarters. If it was the latter, I could only trust in the ability of Roland and the Blessed Artificer.

"And who is it that I speak to?" I replied, clicking my tongue. "What Court boasts such poor manners?"

Dead grass, fire, harvest, hunt and storms. Though the spread of those displayed dominions was not small, it did bring a season to my mind over others. Best to have it confirmed by fae tongue, though.

"Manifold apologies, Your Majesty," the fae bowed. "I am the Count of Ravenous Flame, presently at your service and ever to that of my master, the Prince of Falling Leaves."

Fuck, I thought. So they really were here to prove the Hunted Magician's epithet was well-deserved. Yet beneath the dismay there was something like triumph: Masego, that glorious bastard, had been right once again. Somewhere out there the ruling mantle of the Court of Autumn still existed. There was evidently a lot more power left to it than we'd believed, if there were enough nobles left to call on to assault the Arsenal, but the *principle* of Quartered Seasons had been sound all long even if we'd been unable to prove it.

"You've given me a greater gift than you know, Count," I grinned. "So I give you this in return: if you flee now, I will not pursue."

To my surprise, the nobleman bowed.

"Your capricious arrogance was everything I hoped it would be," the Count of Ravenous Flame replied, "count no debt here, Queen of Lost and Found, for anything I might have gifted by happenstance has been repaid twice over."

The moment he began talking I knew where this was headed: as the Count spoke the last word of his superficially friendly answer, I took a sudden step back and avoided getting skewered by two crooning blades as they thrust where I had been standing a heartbeat before. By the height, the blows would have slid between two of my ribs and punctured my throat. I was almost admiring: fae were rarely so precise in their attempted murder, or so flawlessly synchronized. I was not, however, so admiring that I did not immediately punish that predictable flair for the theatrical: the rightmost of twin fae in copper and grass was smashed in the back of the head by my staff, which sent it stumbling into the other's way. They both spun away towards the Count, smooth in their recovery, so I tossed a handful of blackflame at the left one's grass skirts and watched the flame take with some satisfaction. It cut away the grass-cloth before the burn could spread, but by then I was gathering Night and our

little skirmish had borne more pressing developments. The Count of Ravenous Flame entered the fray.

"A spark, a birth," the Count sang, his voice soothing like the warm crackling of bonfires.

As he strode forward, he trailed sparks. I would have interrupted whatever it was he was doing but the rightmost twin kept me busy: its wings burst to life in a flicker and it used a beating of them to help itself into a backwards leap that would have led it behind me, blade at the ready, if I'd not traced a trail of blackflame in the path. The wings beat again, ending the leap, but by then I'd positioned my staff under it and let loose with a concentrated burst of Night. I caught only its shoulder, but that much I tore right through. The fae screamed in pain, but by then then Count of Ravenous Flame had gotten just enough time to proceed unimpeded.

"A hunger, a swell," the Count sang, voice gone the way of the blaze. "I command you, dimming fire, herald of plenty to lack: devour all you behold, *ravenously*."

The sparks had strengthened, turned to flame, and been swept up in the thunderstorm around us. Only instead of being put out by the rain the fire had spread, as if the very wind was oil, and a howling blaze surrounded us even as the ember-eyed Count of Autumn laughed.

"Perish," he told me, "so thoroughly that naught of you is left to be lost or found."

Damn, I thought, reluctantly impressed. That was a pretty good line to kill me on, if he could pull it off. Already Night was coursing through my veins and as the Count of Ravenous Flame raised his black blade high, heat and fire swirling around it as he commanded the blazing storm, I began shaping my answer.

"The hand in greed can only clutch sand,
Even exquisite passion, the lover's brand
Is a vainglorious army headed for rout:
Ardour fall spent, the flame gutters out."

The verse was spoken in Chantant, barely more than a whisper against the roar of the blaze, and yet it slithered through the burning storm like snake. I knew the voice that'd recited it, that deep and resonant tone that was decadently pleasing to the ear, and the sorcery it was laced with ate at the gathered fires like spreading rot. Even as the Count of Ravenous Flame fought to keep hold of it, the Exalted Poet's verse tore at his work like some divine candle snuffer. An opening, I thought with a wolf's

smile, and abandoned the spinning threads I'd been about to shape Night into in favour of something with a little more bite. When the twin fae came for me this time, wielding their blades of grass, I was ready for them and without a distraction to handle.

One came high, leap aided by wings as its blade whistled down towards my skull, while the other came low: knees bending low beyond what a human body would have allowed, its sword whipped out aiming for the femoral artery on my left leg. It was a close thing, spinning my staff so that the lower part went up and swatted aside the strike about to cut into my skull while the upper part going down nudged the other blow to pass harmlessly between my legs, but worth the risks: with the two fae over-extended in their strikes, neither of them were able to avoid my reply. Two small tendrils of Night sprang out of my staff, shooting out and puncturing the skin of the fae near the throat. The moment they did I dumped all the power I'd gathered, in just the right way, and I got maybe two heartbeats before the fae managed to retreat far enough the tendrils broke.

"You may consider this end," I told them, "courtesy of Mighty Urulan, once of Great Lotow."

I'd never seen anyone melt from the inside before, but considering the sheer amount of acid I'd pumped into their veins it was no surprise that within moment the two fae were bleeding, broken corpses-to-be falling apart as they tried to crawl away. As I'd thought, that was a particularly nasty trick to be on the receiving end of when your body wasn't entirely made up of smoke and mirrors.

"*Dieux du ciel*," the Fallen Monk hoarsely said, sounding sickened.

The Exalted Poet's trick – had that been an aspect or was he potentially more useful than I'd thought? – had killed the flame and the storm with it, restoring a broader line of sight to me. The Fallen Monk, looking more than a little singed and bleeding from messy wounds on his shoulder and belly, threw a wineskin into the path of a sapling-green arrow loosed by the fae adorned in vines I'd glimpsed earlier. The arrow sprouted wild growth as red wine sloshed all over the ground, a young tree falling on the stone and spasming a few times before it began to swiftly wither. That explained the messy wounds, I thought. The Monk had been quick enough to rip the arrows out before *that* could happen inside his body. Good on him, Named or not those roots would have shredded muscles. The Exalted Poet himself was bruised and battered, but there was a reason he'd been able to ply his tricks: he was currently without an opponent.

Given the lack of corpses and two missing fae – the childlike one wearing straw and the antlered huntress in blood and bone – I'd bet that they had casually slapped him down before making a run

upwards. The telltale noises of battle sorcery being used further up good as confirmed it, Roland seemingly making a gallant effort of swatting the fae back down. The real threat, though, was the fae still in the back. The grinning one with the amber eyes, who'd opened the games by casually throwing an entire storm at us. She still there, grin broader than ever as she watched us struggle. *You're the most powerful of this pack*, I thought, *so you have to be at least a Duchess*. A Count would not defer to her otherwise. So why was I finding these opponents so... lacking? Perhaps it was simply that I was no longer a squire or a bastard duchess of my own, and that I'd faced greater monsters since, but I'd just ridden a Baron of Autumn down a drop and killed him without much effort.

Something was wrong here.

Boots squelching wetly as I walked through the dissolved remains of the twin fae, I rolled my shoulder to limber it.

"Poet," I said, "help the Monk. I'll be handling our friend the Count, and the kind lady out back if she'd care to introduce herself?"

A lie, I did not intend to have them fight any of these three right now if I could avoid it, but it was a useful lie so long as the grinning fae heard it.

"You presume much, mortal," the Count of Ravenous Flame chided me.

His long blade rose, and his shield rose with it. I flicked a glance at the Exalted Poet and got a nod confirming he'd heard. Good, I could put most of my attention on the last two then.

"Where's all that sweet queen talk gone, Count?" I grinned. "Still, if you keep talking for your lady I'll have to assume she's a mute – or that you have the right to choose her words for her."

The Count seemed to shrink on himself at that. Fear, I judged. That'd been hard, blood-curling fear at even the possibility that the fae behind him might take offence to his behaviour. That went some way in confirming the pecking order, at least. The Prince of Falling Leaves might be his ultimate master, but where there was a captain there was a lieutenant.

"My dear Aedon is guilty of only eagerness to serve me," the amber-eyed fae laughed. "But your point is taken, Queen of Lost and Found. You stand before the Duchess of Rash Tempest."

"Delightful name," I smiled, all pretty and friendly with just a little too much teeth. "Would you mind ordering your servants to

cease attempting to murder mine as long as we are talking? It's most uncivilized."

"Alas, oath was given," the Duchess shrugged. "I cannot recall those I have sent."

"But our green-clad friend here..." I suggested, gesturing towards the fae archer facing the Poet and the Monk.

"That boon I can deliver," the Duchess of Rash Tempest grinned, "for a price."

Ah, and now we came to the bargaining. If I could keep her talking, and the two fae with her down here with us, then I might be able to send my own two companions upwards to help Roland and the Artificer before all of us came down to tangle with these three together. The key to keeping control of this would be offering terms before she could make demands, since letting fae pick their careful words was a good way to get stabbed by them.

"I'll offer you the last words of a king," I said, "and the dream of a hard-fought defeat, not a decade old."

The Duchess went still. *Yeah, I've dealt with your kind before*, I thought with grim amusement as something like greed seized those amber eyes. *I know what your lot is hungry for.*

"A generous offer," the Duchess of Rash Tempest said, "perhaps too generous."

So she wanted to avoid being in my debt if I was judged to have overpaid, huh. Fair enough.

"I would consider us even, given the might of your servants and the feebleness of mine," I replied.

I heard the Fallen Monk let out a snort of laughter, and the Exalted Poet an indignant yelp – though he took an arrow in the thigh not long after, and I was interested to see he produced a strip of parchment as he sang a verse in what I thought might be Ceseo. Though the sprout-arrow savaged his flesh, by the time the verse had been fully recited it had turned to dust and the Poet's flesh was healed, if heavily scarred.

"Then by these terms I strike bargain with you, Queen of Lost and Found," the Duchess of Rash Tempest said.

"Bargain struck," I agreed. "You two, hurry up and help the Rogue and the Artificer with-"

There was a blinding flash of light, or perhaps Light, and something like a massive thudnerstrike sounded, followed by an inhuman scream.

"That," I completed. "Help them with *that*."

"At your service, mistress," the Fallen Monk said, sounding deeply amused.

"Are you certain you would not like me to remain and record-" the Poet began, then I turned a dark look onto him, "- your wisdom touches me, Black Queen, and so I promptly heed it."

They moved, and for now I put them out of my mind.

"Amusing," the Duchess of Rash Tempest said. "Yet you tarry in fulfilling our bargain."

"I would never," I smiled, then added in Crepuscular, "*My crown I abdicate, and let the worthiest of you bear it.*"

Larat had been king for a moment, after all, even if his first and last decree had been one of abdication.

"I do not know this tongue," the Duchess hissed.

"Then you should have bargained more precisely," I chided her. "But perhaps this will be more to your taste?"

I wove a bubble of Night carefully, using strands of the vision Sve Noc had given of the battle between the Dead King and Vesena Spear-Biter's sigil, and blew it towards her. I had no intention whatsoever of giving her any of *my* memories, even if she might have taken that from the sentence. Disappointment flickered, but hunger won over it soon enough. The Duchess of Rash Tempest's lips opened in a sigh, as the bubble landed on her palm, and she laid delicate fingers against the Night.

The bubble popped.

I'd offered her the dream, not the right to see it, and if she had been unable to keep that dream once given that was hardly my fault, was it? The Duchess turned her amber eyes to me, her face gone frozen with hate.

"What a clever creature you are," she said.

"Nah," I denied, "you're just not as good as this as you think you are."

"Neither are you, I'm afraid," the Duchess replied.

The bowstring twanged and a green arrow whistled as it was loosed at me and I was forced to hastily duck out of the way. Ah, true. While I'd bargained for her servants to stop fighting mine we'd never said anything about them fighting *me*. The Count of Ravenous Flame sprung forward, bare feet unseemly quick as his eldritch sword and board came barrelling towards me.

"Hey, Duchess," I grinned, even as I gathered Night. "Wanna make a bet?"

"Why would I, when you've proved such a feckless debtor?" the amber-eyed fae replied.

The Count was on me before I could answer, sword down and pointing towards me as his shield crackled with the sound of flame. At the last moment he shifted his footing a step and a half to the right, revealing the green arrow whose whistle the crackling had been meant to hide, and clove at my side. I swallowed a curse, for it'd been clever work, but with my free hand caught the edge of the Mantle of Woe and swept it around me. It caught the arrow, but my hasty attempt to push back the cleave with a strike of my staff had me on the losing side. I was thrown back two paces, rolling only to rise into another arrow, perfectly aimed at my throat. A lash of Night erupted from my hand to torch it, but once more the Count of Ravenous Flame smashed into me from the side. A staff was not a sword, with a guard and a proper grip, so even though I caught the blow again the strength of it had the Count's blade sliding down and biting into the flesh of my hand. I half lost a finger there and felt something unpleasant slithering into my blood from the wound.

"Back," I snarled, and Night flooded my veins.

It purged the poison, feeling like ice coursing through me. I struck my staff against the ground, Night billowing out like a wave, and the arrow loosed at me was swept aside even as the Count of Ravenous Flame retreated out of range with a wing-aided leap backwards. I forced calm onto myself, even as blood dripped down my knuckles.

"I get it," I told the Duchess of Rash Tempest, "you don't believe you'd be able to get the best of me, if we had a wager. I sympathize, it's a regrettably common affliction."

"You are attempting to goad me," the amber-eyed fae said.

"I am *succeeding* at goading you," I corrected with an unpleasant smile. "To quote a clever creature of my own acquaintance: a well-laid trap does not rely on surprise but on the opponent's nature."

She had to accept a bet, if I offered it and it looked like she might win. Because she was better than me, greater and cleverer, and she must always get the last laugh with us poor mortals.

"You witty little thing," the Duchess laughed. "What might you even offer as a wager worthy of my time?"

"A duel with Count of Ravenous Flame," I said, "where I will be considered to have lost if I kill him with either Night or my staff."

"You insolent *insect*," the Count snarled.

"Those are all you have," the Duchess of Rash Tempest said, and then looked like she had swallowed a lemon. "I accept, you fool."

How unpleasant it must be, to be able to see the shape of the snare but be driven by your nature to step into it anyway.

"Should I win I want you to answer me five questions, fully and true," I said.

"Should you lose I will have your name, freely given," the Duchess replied.

Ambitious, but then if it got to that the odds were better I'd die.

"Bargain struck," I said.

"Bargain struck," she echoed. "My Count of Green Apples, do head upwards."

Count of Green Apples? No, it wasn't the same. It was the *Duke of Green Orchards* that we'd fought at Dormer all those years ago. And yet when my gaze found the fae in question, he offered me a sly smile before wings bloomed at his back. His face... It'd been a while since I'd thought of the opponent of that night, the creature who'd butchered my Gallowborne and burned Nauk into a mere shadow of himself, but I was nearly certain there was a resemblance there. That was troubling, considering I'd been very thorough about killing that Duke and Hierophant himself had pulverized what had been left of the remains. I didn't have the time to ponder that any further, though, because the moment the bargain had been struck my duel with the Count had begun. I breathed out, settled myself.

A duel, huh.

"Gods," I murmured, "it's been a while, hasn't it?"

The Count of Ravenous Flame advanced in his full splendour, armour glittering in the eerie light of the Belfry, a flick of his long sword gathering bright-red flame along the edge. It was tempting to watch the feet, for against all sorts of opponents the footing told a truer tale of intent than the guard, but against fae it was next to useless. Their bodies did not entirely work like those of mortals, and wings allowed them to further differ from what even Named could accomplish. My right hand was slick with blood, but the same numbing of sensation that had

prevented my leg from hampering me kept the throbbing pain of it quiet, and as I widened my stance and drew a foot back I seized the long staff of yew like a spear without a tip. Far above us sorcery crackled, and voices both human and not mingled in war cries.

"Burn," the Count of Ravenous Flame hissed.

He swung his sword and a wave of flame followed, hiding him from my sight, but I'd seen that tactic used before. Used it myself, even back when I still had ice to throw around. Night gathered at the tip of my staff, forming into a full circle hovering just beyond the wood, and when the Count burst out of his own obscuring wave of flame with his sword half-swung and shining red wings behind him, it was to eat a blast of pure Night in the stomach that smashed him back. My turn. I slipped through the opening in the flame, Mantle of Woe trailing behind me, and even as Night gathered at the tip of the staff I thrust at the Count's chest. He recovered in time, though, shield covering him and the small burst of power that followed impact slid off harmlessly. He raised his shield, smashing down the point of my staff, but I deftly withdrew and slid in a strike just over the rim of his descending shield.

It was slapped away with the side of his blade, followed by a beautiful pivot to turn that slap into a backswing straight at my neck. I ducked low, swing passing overhead, but my unstable footing was punished by a hasty kick that hit my chest and had me falling backwards. I abandoned the staff to break the fall with my hands, weaving Night and leaving it to clatter against the ground even as the red-eyed Count adjusted his footing and prepared for a thrust that would go right through my throat.

"Gotcha," I smiled, pulling at the slender strings of Night connecting my hands to the staff.

The length of yew smashed through the back of the Count's feet, toppling him, and by the time he'd broken the fall with his wings the staff was in my hands and pointed right at his head. A slender arrow of Night, not powerful but quick and piercing, tore right through the golden round collar and into flesh. Not so quickly it was not slapped aside by a strike of the shield before it could go through the fae's throat, but that was the opening I'd been waiting for. In striking, he'd exposed his shield arm – the arrow released, I wielded the staff to hit his exposed elbow before releasing a small burst of Night. Not enough to hurt, but enough to continued feeding the momentum of the movement. He kept spinning, sword arm rising to stabilize his footing, and there I struck again: the piercing arrow of Night went through the wrist like a harpoon, I dragged him back in a spin and the sword the fingers had been grasping went flying.

Without hesitation I threw my staff down onto his knees, impeding his attempt to twist around. One, two, three limping steps to the side, and even as Night flowed through my veins and lent me unnatural precision the Count of Ravenous Flame turned, just in time to watch my fingers close around the hilt of his sword. Burning eyes widened in fear as I stretched out with a grunt and turned that catch into a descending thrust. The shield went up, or would have if my free hand had not pulled at the strings on the staff to smack its length down onto the fae's wrist. It slowed the defence just long enough that my thrust drove deep between those lovely red eyes, finding a deadly sheath. Silence followed in my wake, as I flicked my wrist and ripped the sword clear of the corpse.

"Damn me, but I I've missed this," I admitted with a sigh.

The enemy and I in the pit, fighting to the death, without any of the unending shades and subtleties that my life held these days. Just steel and cunning and the desperate need to live. My eyes went to the amber-eyed Duchess, finding her looking furious.

"You owe me five questions," I said.

"Ask them," the Duchess of Rash Tempest snarled.

"Who rules the Court of Autumn?" I asked.

"No one."

Which meant the mantle was laying there for the taking, if we could just find it. My blood thrummed with excitement. It could be done. The second part of Masego's theory, the one that made a weapon of the crown, it was *possible*. We might yet kill a god, or do something a great deal worse.

"Why have you come here?" I asked.

"To collect a debt left unpaid," the Duchess said.

I waited patiently.

"And to repay that which we owe," she added.

Been hoping I'd ask the next question before she was finished answering, huh? It wasn't my first time interrogating her kind, I wouldn't fall for that.

"Who do you owe that debt to?" I pressed.

"She who told us where the Hunted Magician is," she grimaced.
"The Wandering Bard."

Fucking *finally*, I thought, satisfaction welling up inside me. I'd gotten it out of the mouth of fae, entities that literally

could not lie: the Intercessor had attacked a villain protected by the Terms. Even the Grey Pilgrim would have to bend his neck now. Every single Named in the Grand Alliance would get a warning about the Bard being a hostile and dangerous entity. A warning backed by the most prominent heroes of the age as well as my own not inconsiderable reputation, let her try to talk her way out of *that*.

"In what way are you to repay the debt?" I asked.

"We are to destroy the contents of a certain room," the Duchess of Rash Tempest said, "and break a sword."

Shit, they're going after the Severance as well, I realized. Had I been right, was the Intercessor really just trying to strip away every path out of the deeps we were swimming in except the one she'd let Hasenbach find? If so, this was just the beginning of our troubles.

"Do you have any allies in the Arsenal that are not fae?" I asked.

"Yes," the Duchess said. "Though I know not their identity, only that they can make themselves known to us through a certain phrase."

I supposed keeping the fae in the dark about the traitor Named was only natural, given the number of mages here we had that'd be able to rip that information out of them.

"Victory is transient," the Fallen Monk said, sliding a dagger into my jugular.

Interlude: Rogue

"It takes two hands to clasp in peace, only one fist to strike in war."

– Taghreb saying

Roland had not been forced to dig so deep into his reserves for years and had not missed the sensation it brought in the slightest: like sandpaper against his insides, his very soul rubbed raw and bloody by sore **Use**.

The Rogue Sorcerer pointed the dragon oak wand at the latest fae to land on the railing, the artefact grown sluggish from being fired repeatedly, and swallowed a curse. Another piece of his collection, going up in smoke. The red-veined wand trembled, the last of the dragon blood the tree's roots had once drunk unleashing its nature in the form of a narrow, powerful ray of flame. The Lord of Plentiful Harvest, childlike face serene, winked mischievously at him right before the sorcerous flame tore

right through yet another damned fake made of straw. The bait was gone in a wisp of fire a moment later, as Roland dropped the wand before the angry embers it burst into could savage his hand.

If that one had been a fake, then the real Lord must be the tone trying to break through – before the dark-haired man could finish his thought, another shape bearing the Lord's appearance unleashed a torrent of golden power against the web of crackling Light that Adanna had unleashed around the spire, preventing the fae from ignoring them and simply flying up. The fae's blow stretched the web back, but as Roland mustered a hard smile he already saw how it would end: the web stretched but held, and as if made of rubber it shot back the golden power at the flabbergasted fae that'd struck with it. The Blessed Artificer it had to be said, was abrupt at the best of time and often judgemental.

She was also *ridiculously brilliant*.

"It is too soon to smile, mortal."

Roland did not bother to look behind him, where the voice of the Baroness of Red Hunt was coming from, instead immediately vaulting over the footbridge's railing. *Beloved Gods*, he prayed even as a burst of some sort of power passed just above him and set every hair on his body affright, *for the curse of brag you laid on these creatures, I give many thanks*. Hands already digging in his pocket, the dark-haired man fished out a small engraved copper ring and shoved it onto his finger. The old Arlesite artefact woke eagerly, itching to be used even after centuries, and Roland clenched his belly in anticipation. Though Pelagian artefacts tended to be remarkably long-lasting works, since they'd been made from an understanding of sorcery derived from the Gigantes they tended to also...

Stomach lurching as his momentum was forcefully reversed and instead of dropping down to the bottom of the Belfry, where going by the sound of it Catherine was having a merry old time slaughtering eldritch creatures older than the written word, he instead shot upwards. Roland swallowed a scream and an emerald-studded bronze bracelet on his left wrist, shaped like a snake – which many in the Free Cities considered a symbol of healing and protection – broke like a cheap bauble. Better the Stygian artefact than his spine and most his bones, as would have been the case without the harm-gathering bracelet's effect. Gigantes sorceries were effective but unfortunately they were also made for, well, Gigantes. Living titans who'd barely notice the kind of forces that would snap poor old Roland of Beaumaraais like a twig. Ligurian sorcery, and its Pelagian offspring, as a rule did not usually bother with the protective measures for the caster common to any other family of the Talent.

There was a reason the Jaquinites now held in sway in most of Procer.

Sadly, though he was going up instead of down the Rogue Sorcerer was not unaware that he was still, to used the academic parlance, damned screwed if he did not act. There was only death to be found in the air, when fighting the Fair Folk. Reluctant as he was to call on such a precious resource, Roland reached for the small orb within himself that was the sorcery that'd once belonged to the Hateful Druidess. A mere sliver was unleashed, in the shape of a burst of wind erupting from his back with precise aim that allowed him to stumblingly land back on the footbridge between the sides of the Belfry and its central crystal spire. The Baroness of Red Hunt, though, had been quicker on the move than he. Already she was there, spear of bone raised and the stripes of red going down her face grown vivid. That could prove tricky, Roland noted.

"Crouch," Adanna of Smyrna yelled.

He did, without hesitation, but alas so did the Baroness. Yet the fine line of Light that shot over his head did not simply pass beyond the fae, instead stutteringly halting over the Baroness and then shooting abruptly down onto the fairy's back. Another penitence box, Roland realized even as from the point of impact a hundred small lines of Light spread out and covered every inch of the Baroness of Red Hunt in a shining webbing before locking down. How many of those had the Artificer actually brought? She had to be running out by now. Still, this would buy him at least thirty heartbeats – though the Light cut both ways, protecting as well as imprisoning – before the penitence box broke and the Baroness was freed.

Adanna herself was in a spot of trouble, Roland saw as he turned. The Blessed Artificer used Light much as an enchanter would use sorcery, at first glance, but the Rogue Sorcerer knew better. One of the weaknesses to the blessings of priests – and Chosen – was that they lacked staying power. An object could be made to lastingly have the properties of Light, like holy water or the famous armour of Callowan knights, but Light simply could not be used the way sorcery could be through wards and enchantments. Which meant that while Adanna, like him, relied heavily on artefacts the abilities of those artefacts were nearly always temporary in nature. When the Light ran out, so would they. No trouble, when comparing a wand using magic and one using Light.

A great deal of trouble, however, when comparing the twenty three continuous layers of magical defence Roland currently had on his body compared to the single fading globe of Light that'd been all that separated the Blessed Artificer from the vicious blades and tricks of the Fair Folk. The shell vanished, and in the fading glow three silhouettes were revealed.

Adanna of Smyrna, tall and proud in her loose white button-up shirt and black vest covered by a long apron in striped shades of grey, golden eyes cold behind her spectacles. In her right hand she held a dull sword of iron, roiling with Light, and in her left a phial of coloured glass glowing like a torch. To one side the Lord of Plentiful Harvest was perched on the railing, looking small and childlike in his sweeping cloak of straw but with golden power already gathering above him in the form of a blade. The other fae perched on the other side was an unpleasant surprise, however, for it meant a third lord of the Fair Folk had joined their struggle. Wearing green vines as cloth and quiver, the green-winged fae looked eerily calm as he shaped a long spear out of what looked like young green wood. For a heartbeat, stillness held between the three of them.

Roland's hand went for the doubling of his enchanted coat, fingers closing around a small steel knife heavily inscribed with Mavii runes. A flick of the wrist spun it into the proper grip even as he went for one of his pockets and pressed his thumb on the correct rune for the pocket dimension to present him the handle of his second finest casting rod. The three-foot long rod felt warm against his palm, and even as he swung it forward in an arc began gathering blue flames.

"Mabethe," the Rogue Sorcerer roared in the tongue of the Taghreb.

Scatter, it meant. An imperious incantation for an imperious people. Streaks of blue flame thundered down along the arc he'd traced, shaped like five great furrows, and the dance began anew. The green-winged fae struck with the swiftness of a viper, green spear darting forward, but the Blessed Artificer grit her teeth and shattered the vial of coloured glass in her grip.

"Flee from the Light," she snarled.

Bloody shards dripped down, but they revealed a blooming sun of many colours – Roland was forced to close his eyes, lest he go blind, and even so the glare was burned into his pupils. The fae screamed, and when he found he was able to see again the Lord of Plentiful Harvest was seared and howling. The other, though, had merely retreated into the air past the railing. And was nocking an arrow, aiming at a still-blinking and seemingly unaware Adanna. Had she blinded herself with her own work? The Rogue Sorcerer broke into a run. His flames had been blown away by the great burst of many-coloured Light, but the ornate casting rod was still in his hand. Pulling at one of the dozens of spheres within him that had belonged to mages from the Army of Callow, the Rogue fed the sorcery through the casting rod and let the artefact shape it.

Still at a run, he slashed the length of lapis-lazuli and gold at the winged bowman. A notch of blue flame was spat out, sizzling

in the air as it flew towards the fae. The creature disdainfully flew back with a beat of wings, adjusting his aim with the bow as he did, but was visibly taken aback when the blue flames followed. Adanna traced a streak of blood along the length of the dull iron sword she held, speaking soft words, and in the beat that followed Light bloomed once more: a great construct of it, shaped like a massive sword around the small one she held. The shine reflected against her spectacles, but the Blessed Artificer's hard grin was not to be mistaken for anything but feral as she turned towards the recovering Lord of Plentiful Harvest.

Even as Roland closed the distance between himself and Adanna, the green-winged fae shot a greenwood arrow into the seeking blue flames with open irritation. There was a strange growth of the wood within the blaze, which to the Rogue's disappointment was enough for both fire and arrow to peter out. As it was one of his better bread-and-butter spells, it was disheartening to see it fail so easily. Still, he'd gotten there in time. Adanna carved through a fake fae made of straw, the railing beneath it and even a chunk of the footbridge while she was at it, but the sword of Light would not dissipate on a single blow. It would last for a few more moments, at least, which left the Rogue Sorcerer free too... The arrow streaked forward, but fresh blue flames devoured it even as Roland leapt and his foot landed on the railing.

The green-winged fae was just out of reach and retreating quicker than he could catch up, damnation. He'd been just a little too slow to leap, and now-

"Sweet the sorrow, the heady rue

That has my hand aching of you."

The Exalted Poet's voice sounded like the plucking of a harp, its sorcery filling the air. It sunk into the fae effortlessly, seizing him whole.

"Thank you," the Rogue Sorcerer hollered without turning.

The bowman fae had frozen in apparently transfixing sadness for just a few heartbeats, but it was enough for the Rogue Sorcerer to tackle him in the air. The fae's garments of green vines boiled angrily as the two of them dipped in the air and Roland pressed the casting rod against the side of the fairy's neck before pushing through blue flames.

"Unwise," the fae calmly said.

Well, that'd be nothing new. Even as vines grew wildly and tore the rod out of his grasp, putting themselves between the fire and fae, Roland smiled for he'd not been holding on to the casting tool. His hand on the fairy's shoulder, ignoring the pain of

biting vines that broke through the Praesi shielding tool he'd obtained at great cost, the Rogue Sorcerer rammed his steel knife into his enemy's back. A beat passed.

"Mine," Roland confessed, "is a most greedy Name."

His lot was take and keep and use, though he would never become what he had risen to correct. The Rogue Sorcerer would take only from those deserving: those who misused their talents, the gifts the Gods had given them. And there was another word, for such a thing, one that had become part of who Roland of Beaumaraais was: **Confiscate**, his soul whispered, and Creation whispered with it. Like a hungry leech, his aspect sunk its hooks into the power at the heart of the fae. Ah, a Count of Autumn were we? The Count Green Apples, for that was his name, struggled and trashed impotently as his very nature was exsanguinated. The Rogue Sorcerer might die or go mad, if he took too much of the power within him – especially a power so utterly alien as that of the fae – but then that was why he'd brought the knife.

The runes shone, and blood both human and fae mingled as a the greater part of the power of the Count of Green Apples passed into the steel knife.

"What are you?" the Count gasped.

The wings faded, swallowed whole. The pair began to fall, still intertwined.

"The sole charlatan among a parade of demigods," Roland told the noble. "Smoke and mirrors, my good count. Or rather smoke, mirrors and a *knife*."

Ripping the runic blade free, the Rogue Sorcerer kicked off from the fae and then kicked him again in the face so the creature would drop his leg. He still had a hand free, and a small window as they both fell, but there was no artefact that would *quite* do the trick. Gritting his teeth, Roland shaved another sliver off the Hateful Druidess' power and wove a quick wind that tossed the powerless Count of Green Apples into the first story of the Belfry over the railing, to impact with great fracas against a writing desk. The ground was swiftly hurrying towards Roland, and there seemed to be an unfortunate amount of fire down there, so he promptly began to **Use** the knife that'd drank so deep of the fae noble. His coat and clothes suddenly shivered, and the hand holding the knife was seized by massive pressure as he tried to coax out power from within.

A set of three enchanted black pearls on a string of dried seaweed, an Ashuran acquisition, immediately blew up as the power that tried to force metamorphosis onto his hand was kept from succeeding – the dark-haired man still cursed profusely as the many tiny shards drove through the skin of his ankle. The Rogue

Sorcerer succeeded at making green wings bloom from his back, focusing through the pain, and immediately stopped drawing from the contents of the knife. The pressure faded. The knife he kept in hand, as a tool for control, flying crookedly back up to the footbridge on fae wings. For lack of knowing how to land, Roland instead positioned himself above the bridge and ceased using the knife. The wings shattered and he dropped, landing on his feet. Yet it felt like he'd forgotten something, the Rogue Sorcerer mused as he rose to his full height. It came to him a heartbeat later.

"Mautedit," Roland swore. "My casting rod."

It would have dropped all the way down and the odds it'd broken in the fall weren't low. Still, even if it'd shattered into a few pieces it could likely be repaired by Hierophant or the Blind Maker.

A heartbeat later Night billowed out at the bottom of the Belfry like a massive sea of power unleashed, lapping at the walls and the base of the spire. Roland let out a whimper. How was it that every time he fought at Catherine's side, he ended up losing a priceless and irreplaceable artefact? That casting rod had been crafted in Thalassina, which didn't even exist anymore. Gods, if she'd burned down a slice of the Belfry's library while she tangled with the fae they were going to need to have words. Cross words, even. It would have to wait, however, as now it seemed like the tide might be turning against the fae. The Baroness of Red Hunt had been freed of her prison of Light and come to reinforce the Lord of Plentiful Harvest – who was now missing an arm, and sporting a furious sneer – but now that the Exalted Poet had come, the Chosen finally had numbers on their side.

Odd, Roland thought, that Catherine would have sent up one of the Named with her but not the other. The Fallen Monk would no more be able to withstand existing in the general vicinity of the Black Queen taking a fight seriously than the Exalted Poet would have, which was why he'd assumed reinforcements had been sent at all. Both fae turned, watching him like hawks as the last wisps of his stolen wings dissipated. Yet they were not striking, and neither was the pair of Chosen facing them.

"Unmake your web, witch," the Baroness of Red Hunt said.

Adanna, in her own way a delight, took a moment to realize she was the one being addressed and not the Exalted Poet.

"I think not," the Blessed Artificer stiffly said. "I offer you this instead: surrender now and your deaths will be swift."

Roland would need to have a conversation with her about how the Grand Alliance did not, in fact, endorse the execution captives but he was willing to chalk that one up to a lack of practice in

heroic banter. The Artificer was not young to her Name – she'd had it for a few years – but she had been... sheltered. Treasured for her intellect and miraculous abilities by the Thalassocracy, she'd been privileged and protected to the extent that she had faced neither a villain nor a disaster before coming to join the Tenth Crusade. No wonder her first taste of war at the Red Flower Vales had seen her shy from the frontlines and embrace the concept of the Arsenal wholeheartedly.

"You need not bleed for this," the Lord of Plentiful Harvest told them, voice warm and reassuring. "We seek no death, only to prevent a great danger that threatens us all."

The hateful sneer from earlier was gone from the childlike face, but some ugly glint of it still lingered in the fairy's eyes. Roland trusted not these creatures, and his fingers began inching towards another artefact from his trove. The polished orb of quartz he'd picked up in Dormer, imbued with three Callowan war-spells, was slippery against his sweaty palm but Roland cupped it against the side of his pocket and managed to seize it without giving away the game.

"Your fellows downstairs were not so eager to treat with us," the Exalted Poet said. "This is petty trickery: Splendid are the eldest children of deception."

"Your lives were not bargained for," the Baroness of Red Hunt said. "They will only be lost if you persist in this fool's errand. *Let us through*, lest we all pay for the madness of a single man."

"Whether or not your intentions are laudable no longer matters," the Rogue Sorcerer said, fingers tightening around the orb. "You have attacked the Arsenal, and in so doing become a tool of Keter and Gods knows who else. For that, there is only one end awaiting you."

"The thief speaks at last," the Lord of Plentiful Harvest jeered. "You'll have no more of us, usurper. Your words are wind, and in the end what you stole will take from you."

"What splendid diplomats you make," the Rogue Sorcerer drily replied, fully intending the second meaning. "Begone, creatures."

Will taking hold of one of the sorceries within the orb, Roland let it loose with a thought. He cut the side of his hand at the antlered baroness, a long streak of chittering lightning lashing out forward. Wessen's Fork, as it was called, had been the invention of an ancient Wizard of the West of that name. It was a clever piece of work, a bolt of lightning that – ah, and there it was. The Baroness of Red Hunt threw her spear of bone at the sorcery, but instead of being shattered by the greater power the spell split into two streaks of lightning both still headed

towards the fae. A heartbeat later Adanna tossed up a disk of clay covered in High Tyrian writing, which began to spin and shot out a long blade of Light. The two fairies elected to retreat, pushing off the railings and dropping below.

The spear of bone fell into dust and vanished, but Roland wouldn't fall for that trick twice: the Baroness would have the thing in hand when she next reappeared.

"They are not attacking anew," the Blessed Artificer noted. "Perhaps they are retreating."

"That would be a stroke of luck," Roland said, implicitly disagreeing. "Poet, how fares the fight below?"

"The Black Queen triumphs," the other man shrugged. "And requires not the assistance of my verses in her struggles."

"But the Fallen Monk's fists suit her better?" Adanna said. "One cannot account for taste, I suppose."

Roland kept his eyes on the Poet as the Artificer talked, looking for a reaction. He found only indifference there, as if the matter did not truly concern him. Roland knew little of the Monk, save what Archer had mentioned in passing. The man had talents useful against those who used Light, and a knack for stepping lightly. As befitting, the Rogue Sorcerer supposed, of a villain who'd been able to very publicly murder several of the Holies and then escape Laurence de Montfort's pursuit. The dark-haired man went through his pocket, finding a slender wand of ebony. It was petty work but its sole enchantment, one that spewed out a fist-sized blow of kinetic force, tended to be useful in all sorts of situations. Roland twirled it absently around his fingers, feeling the sorcery within lapping eagerly at his skin.

"Your aid here is welcome," Roland agreeably said. "For when they will return."

"If they return," the Blessed Artificer insisted.

"I expect they will, my lady," the Exalted Poet said. "Yet I have something of my own prepared that might wound them, a fresh work inspired by what I glimpsed below."

The Rogue Sorcerer joined up with the other two, shoulder brushing past the Poet's as he kept half an eye on the empty space around them. But only half, for he had not forgotten this band's true purpose.

"I look forward to witnessing it," the Blessed Artificer said.

"I will endeavour not to disappoint," the Poet laughed. "Yet it might be a verse of some potency. Do either of you have any defences I should beware of hurting?"

"Yes," the Blessed Artificer noted. "My web is maintained by a-"

"*Stop*," Roland ordered, eyes on the Poet. "Leave it at that, Adanna."

There lay hidden beautiful diamond spinning top that formed the web of Light blocking the fae from going upwards would keep feeding it so long as the top kept spinning and there was Light within it. It'd been covered by illusion of his own – more accurately, of a travelling illusionist with some truly unpleasant habits Roland had briefly encountered – and had been stashed away in a nook within the spire to their side, where it should be beyond harm for now.

"If he does not know, he cannot avoid disrupting it," the Blessed Artificer lectured him.

"I do not know what I have done to earn your mistrust, Lord Sorcerer, but I can only apologize for it," the Exalted Poet told him, though he sounded at tad aggrieved.

"Why aren't the fae attacking, Poet?" Roland asked.

"Who can know the minds of the Splendid?" the Poet replied. "Perhaps they are waiting for us to be distracted, or even striking at the Black Queen's back."

Then why can't I hear any noise coming from downstairs? the Rogue Sorcerer thought. Not a single noise at all, not since there'd been that massive wave of Night.

"What did Queen Catherine say when she sent you up and not the Monk?" Roland asked.

"She simply ordered us so, and we obeyed," the man laughed. "Who dares argue with a such a woman?"

That laugh had come just a little too quickly, the Rogue Sorcerer decided. And Catherine was commanding, true, but in no way above explaining her reasonings when asked. If anything Roland had noticed she tended to think better of the people who *did* ask, if the situation allowed for it and the tone was not confrontational.

"Of course," Roland said, smile tugging at his lips. "I would have done the same."

His fingers tightened against the ebony wand. He could not prove it, but his instincts were screaming. There was a band of possible traitors, Catherine had made clear to him, and Roland

fancied he'd just sniffed one of them out. It was the silence below that worried him. The Black Queen at war was many things, but *quiet* was not usually one of them.

"It has been a long day," the Rogue Sorcerer apologized. "The web is maintained by an artefact I hid under illusion, Poet, I'll allow you to glimpse through it."

He gestured, calling on one of the spheres within him, and crafted an illusion of a little box of glittering gold in the middle of the footbridge. One only the Levantine should be able to see. The Exalted Poet's eyes flicked to it, which was when Roland casually pressed the tip of his wand against the man's throat.

"Don't move," the Rogue Sorcerer mildly said.

"This is becoming absurd, Lord Sorcerer," the Poet protested.

"Roland, put that wand down," the Blessed Artificer ordered. "Your suspicions are getting out of hand."

"I do not understand what is moving you to violence," the Exalted Poet told him. "And the fae could return at any moment."

"The Count of Green Apples that nearly killed the Artificer," the dark-haired man said, "did you get sent before or after he flew up?"

Roland was not unfamiliar with clever sorts, women with glib tongues or witty men with laughing eyes. Liars of one shade or another, especially Named, were used to being able to talk themselves out of anything. That could be used. And in this particular case, the burly Levantine might have the frame of a warrior but as far as the Rogue Sorcerer knew he only had sparse fighting experience under his belt. That was a weakness in knowledge, paired with a proficiency and tendency at lying.

"After, naturally," the Exalted Poet said. "I assumed I was sent as reinforcements."

Except that Catherine would have known that the Count would get here long before anybody sent up by the stairs, considering the wings, so that decision made no tactical sense. It would have been better for her to drag back down the Count of Green Apples with Night while her two helpers kept the other fae at bay long enough for her to pull it off.

Without hesitation, Roland fired the wand right into the man's throat.

The Exalted Poet blew over the railing, toppling down with a surprised scream.

"Roland," the Blessed Artificer screamed.

He turned to find she had pointed a short stave of charred wood at him, eyes gone grave behind her spectacles.

"Two out of three are traitors," the Rogue Sorcerer noted, for the Poet had covered for the Monk with his words and the conclusion to be had was obvious. "I wonder, will it be three?"

"You're the one who just threw an ally to his death, you madman," Adanna retorted. "Put down the wand, Roland."

"If you are, your game is deep enough I can hardly glimpse it," Roland admitted. "But I will not surrender my wand, Artificer."

He would not disarm himself when the enemy was not about to return. She'd understand soon enough, anyway.

"You leave me no choice, then," she grimly replied.

A heartbeat later a spear of bone pierced up from under the footbridge, tearing through where Roland had woven the illusion of a golden box. The bait had been taken. The Baroness of Red Hunt burst through in a storm of rubble, red wings bright as Adanna's face fell.

"You laid a trap," the Blessed Artificer said, catching his eyes.

"Nothing," the fae shouted. "It was *nothing*, you useless worm."

"That would have been it for the web," Roland replied, ignoring the creature.

The end of the footbridge opposite the spire shivered as a glamour went down, revealing the Exalted Poet – throat visibly bruised – and the Lord of Plentiful Harvest at his side.

"It does not have to be this way," the Poet rasped. "They are right, Artificer, you already know it. You were shown the truth, weren't you? They play with powers beyond their understanding, and they will doom all the world."

"Traitor," the Blessed Artificer replied in an indignant hiss. "I stand with Above, now and always."

A moment of tense silence passed.

"Her wonders will break if she dies, most likely," the Exalted Poet said, tone reluctant.

The fae looked unamused, both of them.

"A pinnacle of uselessness," the Lord of Plentiful Harvest sighed, face displaying a childish moue. "We knew this already."

"Wrong," the Blessed Artificer said. "You know nothing and less."

"I know this, child: the Black Queen is dead," the Baroness told them. "Take down your web now, if you do not wish to follow her in this."

Roland's fists clenched. They could not lie *knowingly*, he reminded himself. Which still meant there would be no reinforcements. It would be a hard fight, even with the fae lord crippled and the Poet's throat hurt.

"I'll take the Lord of Plentiful Harvest and another," the Rogue Sorcerer mused. "Do you want the Poet or the Baroness?"

A wreath of blinding Light came to life around the charred stave in the Blessed Artificer's hand, crackling like lightning and growing into a great spear.

"I'll take both," Adanna of Smyrna snarled.

Well, who was he to argue with a lady?

Interlude: Archer

"The kindest mirror is an old friend, the cruellest an old foe."
– Callowan proverb

The smell was, impossibly, just the same as Archer remembered.

That sweet, high odour that came from too many different herbs being hung to dry for even a Named nose to be able to tell them apart. Deeper in, Indrani knew, the lingering potion fumes would add a lingering tang of sourness: it'd been near impossible to get rid of that even out in Refuge, where there was nothing but open air around the Concocter's workshop, and a room of stone would fare no better. Gods, it was like she'd never left Refuge. It felt like any moment now Alexis might turn the corner, covered in twigs and dirt, eyes looking for the fight her mouth wouldn't admit she was picking. Like John was just out of her sight, with those *stupid* bells and the tasteless tattoos he'd be so damned proud of, like Lysander would be getting a fire going for the fresh stag he'd caught with the latest beast he'd brought to heel. But there was no time for reminiscence, for memories fond and not. The smell had only come when the door was yanked open and the Concocter's dour face was revealed.

"Archer," the other woman said, general dourness turning into a proper frown. "What do you want?"

"That any way to talk to an old friend, Cocky?" Indrani smiled, all nice and toothy.

She hated being called that, always had, but then she'd refused to give out so much as a fake name to any of them. Even the Lady, who'd been amused enough at the novelty of being refused something she'd never pursued the matter. As children the other pupils had made a game of picking the Concocter a name and half a hundred must have been thrown around, few of them clever and all of them mean. She'd invited it, in much everyone else's opinion: Cocky's disposition was what a poet might call just fucking awful.

"Funny," the Concocter thinly smiled, even as her purple eyes narrowed. "Stop wasting my time. What do you want, Archer?"

It was amusing to see the eyes were purple now. When Indrani had left Refuge they'd been bright yellow, and last time she'd been at the Arsenal they'd been an unnatural shade of green. The hair was still black – had been for a few years, though the more sober colours these days would never make up for that memorable month when they'd been thirteen and Cocky had thought she could pull off platinum blonde – but it was now straight instead of curly, and long enough to be pulled into a thick topknot behind her head. The colour of her skin she'd never tinkered with, a pleasant southern tan that could be from anywhere south of the Waning Woods, but where other women might paint rouge over their lips Cocky had simply turned her own the same shade of purple as her eyes. It was one of her more striking appearances, Indrani admitted, if far from one of her wildest.

"I'm here on behalf of the Black Queen," Archer replied. "You fucked up, Cocky, and you were even sloppy enough to leave a trail. So now I've got questions and you've got answers."

Indrani let her smile harden a bit.

"It's up to you how polite my getting those is going to be," Archer said.

"She's no queen of mine," Cocky said, rolling her eyes. "My terms were reached with the Grand Alliance. If you want to ask me questions, come back tomorrow after making an –"

Indrani kept it measured: a light jab in the throat had her choking, but it wouldn't do lasting harm. The Concocter stumbled backwards and Archer elbowed the door aside, her old acquaintance tripping all over her grey robes as she tried to retreat. Wasn't this familiar too? Indrani felt a surge of grim amusement pass through her. When she'd been young and fresh off bondage, fresh into the Lady's care, she'd once done something much like this. Only instead she'd beaten the Concocter for the purpose of ransacking her stores of anything Indrani might fancy without any need to do something like *trading*.

Cocky had taken it when it happened, she didn't have much of a choice, but then that same night Beastmaster and the Silver Huntress had jumped Indrani in her cot and savagely beaten her within an inch of her life before returning the goods to the Concocter. They'd got paid with manticore bait and sedative for Lysander and a full set of tailored physical supplement potions for Alexis, both of which were near impossible to get from anyone else.

The Lady had said not a word, no more than she had done when Indrani robbed the Concocter. The Ranger did not play favourites.

"You've got ties with smugglers," Indrani said. "We've got proof, so you have not a damned thing to hide behind."

Cocky, one hand clutching her throat, backpedalled deeper into her rooms. Where Masego's were the amalgam of a workshop, library and bedchamber as conceived of by somehow who genuinely saw little difference between the three, these were openly a potioneer's brewing room with a small nook to sleep in. Between the seven cauldrons, the several cabinets of ingredients and the lines crisscrossing the room with herbs hung on to dry, it was a miracle a writing desk could fit in there, much less the silk panes delimiting the space where Cocky's bed and clothes trunk had been stashed. It was all real candles in here, as magelight might disrupt more delicate brewing, but enough strange humours had seeped into the wax and wick that half the flames seemed to burn in blue or green. Those flickering lights played against the Concocter's face as she tried to reach for a vial of green liquid in a rack, though she froze before she withdrew it.

Indrani's knife at her throat had seen to that.

"None of that, now," Archer said. "I told Cat I could get answers out of you alive, I'll look like a real tart if we have to call up your shade instead."

She paused, meeting purple eyes.

"But the more you try your hand at this the more I'm feeling tartish, get me?"

Cocky scoffed.

"You haven't asked a thing," she said. "You're just looking to hurt something, as usual."

"Tell me about your smuggling friends," Indrani said, taking back the blade.

"Did you think just because you shoved a few hundred people in a box they'd stop wanting things?" the Concocter snorted. "A few flake addicts from the guards were already looking to get their

fix in quietly, a few strings were pulled and it got broader and organized. If your mistress had any sense, she'd look away and let it go. No one can live off only what's brought in on inspected supply wagons."

The thing was, Indrani tended to agree. Flake was pretty gentle, as far as alchemical drugs went, and the infamous side-effect of your skin flaking off in chunks when scratched only happened if you'd been taking it regularly for years. Otherwise it was just euphoria in a bottle, which might go a long way towards making daily patrols in this boring grey hell liveable. It was inevitable that people in the Arsenal would want, once in a while, to partake of a little something without it first coming across the desk of the likes of the *First Prince of Procer* in a list. It was healthy, even. Keeping your head down all your life, toeing the line to the letter, it killed something in your soul. On the other hand, she could see where Cat was coming from too: people were smuggling things into the dimensional fortress where all the god-killing weapons and the nasty frontline tricks were being made, and that meant *risks*.

The kind that you just didn't take when it came to Ol' Bones, unless you wanted a city or two to die screaming.

"And when did you get involved with them?" Archer asked.

"Well, Indrani, haven't you become just the most devoted hunting hound I ever did see," Cocky sneered "How does that work, anyway? Throw the Archer a fuck, she brings back a few corpses? I suppose even she can't stomach you for long, if she has to pass you off to the H-"

The Concocter went still as the tip of the longknife hovered a mere hair's breadth away from the surface of her left eye, afraid to even blink. Anger was good, anger was warmth in the blood and something like satisfaction when you finally butchered the thing that'd made it burn in you. But anger wasn't going to get her those answers, so Archer made an effort to master it. It wasn't true, she knew that, and it wasn't like some words from a woman long a stranger would make her doubt it. But to have someone speak in such a vile way of ties that were so important to her almost felt like a sort of defilement.

"You don't really need two of those to keep brewing," Indrani said. "And you don't need either of them to answer my questions. I wouldn't forget that if I were you, Cocky. I certainly haven't."

"You wouldn't," the Concocter said.

Indrani smiled at her, the knife's tip still as the grave.

"You know me better than that," Archer simply said. "If I have to repeat my question, I'll be taking something as recompense."

"Maybe a year ago," Cocky said. "I needed some ingredients that'd get me unwanted attention, they needed the kind of clout that comes from having a Named in your corner. We scratched each other's back, that was it."

It would have had to be something truly unpleasant, Indrani knew, for the Concocter to not have wanted to put it to ink in requisition form. There were very few lines the Grand Alliance was not willing to cross, these days. The desire to survive had lowered the standards of what people were willing to suffer to exist, or even enable. But Archer was not here for Cocky's old tricks, she had greater prey to hunt.

"You introduced the Wicked Enchanter to them," Indrani said. "Why?"

Catherine didn't know Cocky the way Archer did, didn't understand that for a stranger there really weren't a lot of levers that could be used to move a woman like that. So Cat figured that the Bard had found an ally here, but Indrani didn't. The Lady had raised all of them to know better than to make a deal with any entity you didn't know how to kill.

"Because he seemed like a man who'd use the service," Cocky said, rolling her eyes. "And he might have become useful when-"

The longknife flicked down, finely slicing through skin from below the eye to the bottom of the Concocter's cheek. Blood began to bead before the point had returned to hover above the eye, and the other Named swallowed a moan of pain.

"Lie to me again and it'll be the eye," Archer coldly said. "We called up his shade, Cocky, and we dug into things. We know a lot more than you think."

"Fine, it was a favour called in," the Concocter hissed out. "Happy?"

Indrani's face tightened in dismay. Had she really struck a deal with the Bard? Gods, one of the Lady's own? They'd been taught better than that, than to let themselves be made pawns and pieces in the Game of the Gods.

"Whose favour?"

"You know who," Cocky said. "The woman holding your leash might despise her, but half the heroes have a fond word to say."

"The Wandering Bard," Indrani quietly said.

"I heard the Peregrine has her back," the Concocter smiled. "I expect he'll speak for me as well, if you try to press this too far. Did you think you were the only one who could make friends in high places?"

Archer's fingers tightened around the hilt of the longknife.

"You have no idea who you bargained with," she tightly said. "Burning Hells, Cocky, what made you think you could bargain with a creature like that and end up ahead? We were both taught —"

The Concocter let out a burst of laughter, and Indrani had to pull back the blade or she would have pierced her eye.

"Oh, Ashen Gods," Cocky said. "Years out of Refuge, even after taking up with another band of villains, you still clutch to your blanket like a child. That blade you point so proudly at me, it's from the set she gave you isn't it? And that scarf, taken from the man who owned you while she looked on with *motherly fondness*."

"We all hid beneath her wing, before we could fly on our own," Indrani said. "There is no shame to be had there."

"There's always shame in being a fool," the Concocter said. "She wasn't your mother, Indrani. She wasn't any of our mothers, and she was barely even our teacher. She never gave a damn, even about you, and well all knew you were the favourite. The way you'll shatter like cheap glass if you admit that is honestly the most pathetic thing about you."

The urge was there to slice her again. Archer had sliced people for less, and she was being provoked her beyond what anyone could expect her to suffer without steel being bared. But Indrani had not come here to spill blood, she had come here for answers. And if she could not master herself long enough for get what she'd come from, if red heat and pride was all that she could bring forth, then she truly would be pathetic. Just a thug, fit for thug's work and nothing else. And the truth was that while there might have been a time where that would have been enough, when taking and bearing the consequences and doing it again and again and again until she died would have satisfied her, it no longer was. She had a hearth now, a warm place by it, and sometimes that meant bending the neck for a bit. A thirteen the thought of this would have disgusted her to the bone, but she was older now. She had learned what the world was like, when you were alone.

Indrani had come to understand why it was the world had fewer wolves than dogs.

"Gasses were used on the librarians in the Miscellaneous Stacks," Archer said. "They were rendered unconscious but not killed. Your work as well?"

Cocky was, for the first time, visibly taken aback.

"I, but – I didn't use those," the Concocter said. "They were a private commission from the Highest Assembly and the First Prince, a way to quell riots without deaths. But I only made a single batch, and it should be in the Repository awaiting shipment. I haven't *attacked* anyone, Archer."

She wasn't lying, Indrani decided. Not because of any particular fondness for the Concocter, but because she very much doubted that Cocky had dragged the potions and set them off in the Stacks. She wouldn't have the know-how for something that complex, much less the sneaking skills. Which meant there was at least one other traitor out there, acting knowingly on behalf of the Bard. And it'd been a traitor who'd known about a private commission being kept in the Repository, so most likely someone who worked in the Workshop and would have known about Cocky brewing something meant to ship out.

"I believe you," Archer admitted. "And will speak to that, along with the rest."

Something like surprise, and perhaps even gratitude, flickered across Cocky's face. Indrani, without wasting a moment, flipped her grip and struck her right in the fucking face with her longknife's handle. The Concocter's nose broke with a beautiful crunch, cartilage smashed and blood spraying. Archer's loosened her grip, after, and flicked her wrist as if she was shaking her knuckles.

"Consider that a reminder," Indrani said, "of lessons you should not have forgot."

And with that their business was done, she mused. If there was need for the location of the Repository crates raided for the gas receptacles, someone could be sent for ask. Besides, it was quite possible that the Concocter herself did not know. The other woman had reeled back from the blow, shouting in pain and holding her broken nose, but after her fingers came away red she turned to Indrani with cold eyes. Cocky smiled, that one nasty little number she only pulled out when she had something cutting to spit out in someone's ear.

"And there she is," the purple-eyed woman said. "Our old *friend* Indrani, bare of the pretences. It's a relief to see you acting without those airs you've been putting on. Still looking to just make someone bleed and then hiding behind another's cloak when consequences come."

That stung, more than it should have after the years that'd passed since she left Refuge.

"I'm not the one who's hiding behind the Terms," Indrani replied. "Or you'd be bleeding from a lot deeper in for some of the things you've said tonight, Cocky."

"Whatever happened to rules only mattering to other people, Archer?" the Concocter slyly said. "I thought you were going to be freed, unfettered. Nothing but you and the horizon, right?"

"Which of us is supposed to be clutching the Lady like a blanket again?" Indrani jeered. "Did it wound your precious little pride when she left, Cocky? Did it bite to realize that even with all your little potions and secrets in the end you just weren't that *special*?"

"Even now you're licking her boots," the Concocter said, tone disgusted.

"I always knew what she was," Indrani replied. "Who she was. She told us from the start. It's your own delusions that scraped you raw."

"Knew what she was?" Cocky shouted. "You sanctimonious bitch, you signed up with the first outfit that took you in. We stayed, Indrani, we stayed and she *left*. All these years with her, for her, and almost without a word she just left. Because we were pets to her, Archer, not people. And when you find something more interesting to do, pets get left behind."

"Whining," Indrani replied, contemptuous. "The pathetic whining of someone who was unwilling to stand on their feet and find their way outside the shelter of the Lady's shadow. You were given years as a pupil, teachings half the continent would lose a hand for, and now you complain because she was not willing to hold your hand until you breathed your last."

The Concocter snorted.

"Look at you, talking proudly like you didn't just trade one mistress for another," she mocked. "You think it makes you someone, that some girl with a crown found you fit to kill for her? You're still fetching errands for one of your betters, now you just have some fancy seal behind you instead of Ranger's reputation."

There was anger there, Indrani found, but any fool could have found that. The old hate was familiar too, in its own way, but it was the unfamiliar glint that caught Archer by surprise. Envy. And just like that, it fell into place.

"It burns you, doesn't it?" Archer said. "That I'm actually *happy* now."

The Concocter hadn't even flinched this hard when she'd broken the woman's nose.

"I wonder if they'd look at you the same, your Woe, if I told them what you're really like," Cocky said.

"They know," Indrani replied. "They've known from the start, and they love me anyway. That's the part that really burns you, isn't it?"

"You were *vile* to us," the Concocter snarled. "To everyone, any time you could get away with it. You taunted and bruised and bled us for sport, and now you're the Black Queen's enforcer?"

"We were all like that, Cocky," Indrani said. "And I don't miss it, but the lessons of those days kept me alive through worse ones."

"I still remember that night you forced Alexis into that sack full of beetles and tied it up," the purple-eyed villainess said. "Gods, the way she screamed. And the Lady just said-"

"That's one way to cure a fear," Indrani softly finished.

Casually, she'd said it. Almost amused. There'd been a time where Archer had admired that, thought that callousness was something to be cultivated instead of exactly what it claimed to be: callouses. Roughness born of use, the easiest thing in the world to accrue.

"No wonder she still wants to kill you," Cocky said. "One look at you with your Hierophant and your little queen and she will draw a fucking blade, Archer."

If she bent her neck now, Indrani thought, there might yet be something to repair here. Because they'd all hated each other at times, the Concocter was right about that, but it'd also been more complicated than that. Because it'd been them and then everyone else, and that wasn't a place you could live in for years without loving the people you shared it with. There had been warm lights shared along with the dark places. But Indrani would have to apologize. To express regret. To *lie*. Because the truth of it was that Archer didn't particularly regret who she'd been at thirteen. She'd make no excuses for that girl either, but Indrani could look that past in the eye without feeling all that ashamed.

Sometimes she figured that Catherine believed her to be, when they talked of Refuge. But Hells, Cat had always taken them as better people than they were. Sometimes Indrani felt a little bit of shame over that, not being the better person her friend thought she was, but those claws never dug deep. Mostly because Archer actually liked who she was, for the most part. She was

comfortable with it, she'd *grown* comfortable with it. And that meant if the things she cared about changed in ways she might never have imaged they would when she'd been a girl, it didn't trouble her. Indrani believed in doing what she wanted, most of all, and sometimes that could be a little more complicated than just enjoying what was happening at hand.

"Refuge is dead," Archer said, "bury it, Cocky, and move on. I have."

"You don't get it, do you?" the Concocter laughed, and it was a bleak sound. "You think it's about your having found a good backer or a bedmate, or even just a place in the world. That we hate the way you thrive."

"Isn't it?" Indrani asked.

"It's the way you laugh with them, Indrani," Cocky quietly said. "The way there's no prick to the barbs. Because you love them and they love you."

Hand whipping around she viciously threw down a rack of empty vials, glass shattering over the floor, and there was a hate on her face that was like pondwater gone still and festering.

"We would have loved you too, if you'd let us," the Concocter said. "If you'd given us what you give them. But you never did. What is it that makes them so much *better*, Archer, so much more *deserving*?"

"I never had to fight them," Indrani honestly said.

They'd never been competition, the way the others had been in Refuge. There'd been jostling, growing pains, but never anything with *bite* to it. It'd been a hearth opened to her, not other wolves to fight for the same scraps.

"That's the thing, Archer," the Concocter tiredly said. "You never *had* to fight us either."

That, more than any other thing she had heard that night, gave Indrani pause. It had the unpleasant ring of truth to it. The other woman drew in on herself, bloody and somehow looking exhausted.

"Go," she said. "I have to brew myself something to fix the nose and I've seen enough of you for two lifetimes."

Indrani replied with a jerky nod, wiping her blade clean on her coat before sheathing it and abruptly turning. It felt like fleeing when she left the room, no matter how much she told herself otherwise. The door closed shut behind her and Archer let out a shallow breath. She, too, felt oddly exhausted. Leaning

against the wall for a bit, she wondered if would truly leave it all at that. There were more pressing things to see to, and she needed to find Cat and pass along the answers, but somehow she thought that if she left now that conversation would be over for good. Could she live with that? Did she *want* to? Lips twisting, she raised a hesitant hand towards the handle.

The Arsenal shivered.

Indrani's hair rose up all over her body, the sensation of coming danger acute, and the hand went down. There was never enough time, was there? It was something you had to learn to live with, the give and take of how you were willing to spend yourself. The door was slammed open and Cocky peered out, some sort of dark poultice shining on her cheek. She caught sight of Archer a moment later.

"What was that?" she asked.

The Arsenal shivered again, like door being pounded on.

"Trouble come a 'knocking," Indrani drawled.

She cocked her head to the side, studying the other villainess.

"*What?*" the Concocter said, sounding irritated.

"You're going to end up on a lot of powerful people's shit list your role in this, Cat not the least of them," Archer said.

"And?" Cocky replied, unimpressed by the prediction.

"How would you like to get a head start," Indrani said, "on earning your way out of those?"

They locked gazes, hazelnut to purple, and a long moment passed. The Concocter dipped her head the slightest bit.

"I still have a field bag," Cocky said. "Give me a moment to grab it."

It wasn't much, Indrani thought. Barely anything at all. But it was something, and if she'd learned anything since she'd stumbled across the two most important people of her life in Marchford all those years ago, it was this: people who didn't plant seeds never got to grow trees.

—

Indrani wasn't surprised the Arsenal's wards eventually broke, even though Cocky expressed her disbelief what must have been a least three different times. It didn't matter how tall the walls were or how thick the gates when there were traitors behind both. The breach had taken place in a set of hallways between the

Belfry and the Workshop, so the two of them had been close, but by the time they got there the battle had moved on. An utterly smashed workshop that'd once belonged to the Blind Maker now boasted mostly broken wood and corpses, though fresh guards had come in since what must have been the first slaughter. Archer found an officer and got asking question, Cocky lingering behind her and not bothering to offer potions to the few wounded still around. Indrani approved.

The brews she carried that'd help were expensive, and best kept for more urgent situations.

"We were crushed, Lady Archer," the Levantine captain in charge told her. "We would have all been slain if the Mirror Knight and his allies did not intervene."

"Who did the crushing?" Indrani asked.

"Fae," the captain said. "They were not many, less than thirty, but their power... it was like nothing I've ever seen."

If the Courts ever remembered the Dominion of Levant's existence it was no doubt to even more promptly forget about it, so that didn't mean much. There was no point in asking the mustachioed man if it was a princess or a count they were dealing with, it wasn't like the fairies went around announcing their titles to human rank and file.

"Mirror Boy and his band drew them away?" Indrani pressed.

"Some but not all," the captain said. "A band left the rest, heading for Belfry. And there are some among my men who say it was not the Mirror Knight that had the fae moving."

"Meaning?" Archer frowned.

"They might have been looking for someone, and that is why they let themselves be drawn towards the Repository," the captain said. "But it was battle, Lady Archer, and that makes for poor recall and wild truths."

"Thank you, captain," Indrani muttered, and the man saluted.

Cocky leaned in closer.

"The Repository is where they've been stashing that sword," she quietly said.

"Adjutant's with Looking Glass and his buddies," Indrani replied. "He'll keep them pointed at the enemy, and the enemy out of the good stuff. We're headed for the Belfry."

The Concocter's brow rose.

"Worried about your," and there she hesitated, "... lover?"

"Partner," Archer said. "No, he can look after himself just fine. But he keeps some nifty stuff in his rooms, and I don't think it's a coincidence that fae headed that way."

"We'll be too late to do much, considering the fae left some time ago," Cocky pointed out.

"We're late as first line of defence, sure," Indrani shrugged. "But we're headed out as reinforcements, and for that we're just fine."

Because a running battle against fae in the middle of the Belfry had trouble written all over it, which mean Cat would be drawn there like a moth to the flame. Probably half drunk and halfway through a terrible plan that'd somehow end up working, Indrani fondly thought, or at least close enough to working that she could pretend it'd achieved what she'd meant it to. They set out quickly, because fashionably later got results but actual late was just being sloppy. The gates into the great tower of the Belfry were wide open, but wariness wasn't why Indrani's steps stuttered. The very stone of the floor had been charred, almost turned to glass in that distinctive way that blackflame did. But this was too much, she thought, and not wielded well. Even just the shape of the burn...

She strode forward, heedless of the possibility of ambush and even the sound of fighting far above. The Night had, by the marks on the floor and the slight inclined of melted stone, billowed outwards in an explosion. But at the centre of where that explosion had begun, Archer could see a charred corpse with a knife stuck in its neck. She knew that blade, had seen it used before. *No*, Indrani told herself. *It can't be her. She wouldn't have died from a knife.* Cat might not be able to pull the regeneration tricks the drow could, or even heal with Night, but she could have kept herself from bleeding out long enough to kill the Fallen Monk and gotten to a healer. Indrani chose to ignore the treacherous whisper in the back of her mind about Night being able to hurt Catherine, when she did not properly control it.

"Cocky," Archer said, voice steady. "I need you to have a look at that corpse."

The other woman grimaced.

"Archer, that's probably..."

"If it is, I want to know for sure," Archer said. "Cut the body if you have to."

The Concocter slowly nodded.

"And you?"

Indrani reached for the bow on her back, fingers itching for an arrow, and looked up at the spire where the sounds of a fight were echoing from.

"I'm going to make someone bleed," the Archer said, and her voice rang of steel.

Interlude: Deadhand

"One hundred and twenty-five: under no circumstances should you trust anyone who has the title of chancellor, vizier or duke. While they will always be powerful and competent, keep in mind they will also inevitably turn out to be in some way treacherous."

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

One was limping, two were nursing an arm and Adjutant had only withstood that blow from the Duke of Unrelenting Landslide's morningstar at the price of his plate being dented and the flesh beneath it torn right through.

The Repentant Magister had done what she could, and she was a skilled healer, but magical healing was less immediately potent than the priestly kind when it came to deeper wounds. All of them were Named, and so the pain and increased fragility was only a minor matter, but Hakram had considered it an interesting piece of irony that he usually received a better quality of healing with the Woe, a band of villains, than he had from a pack of Above's designated footsoldiers. The air was rife with tension as the band of five he accompanied let the Vagrant Spear guide them through the bare stone corridors, though conversation had not died down even the wake of the defeat inflicted unto them by what could only be remnants of the Court of Autumn. The calm voice in the back of Hakram's mind noted that where the Woe would be digging into their second plan of attack by now, everyone pitching even if it was Catherine who'd put it all together, these five were instead wasting their breath on largely inconsequential matters.

Adjutant decided to take his own evaluation with a grain of salt, acknowledging he would always favour his own companions whether or not he was aware of it.

They'd all been headed towards somewhere called the Spins for some time now, ominously enough without any fae harassment as they moved. Aside from Hakram's professional vexation at the way half of the Arsenal seemed to have some sort of nickname known only to the locals, on top of the already labyrinthine amount of sections within the facility, there should have been no reason for displeasure on anyone's part. Unfortunately, the lack of immediate peril meant the Mirror Knight's band of five had

promptly lapsed back into open malfunction. It felt like dealing with children, Hakram thought. While that was not entirely a rare thing with heroes, who were often more preoccupied with pretty ideals than practicalities, this band of five was... remarkably unstable. It would not be impossible to make them functional, in his opinion, but it would take sustained effort to keep them that way and some truly miraculous labour to mend the root causes.

"Would you hurry, Magister?" the Blade of Mercy complained. "We'll lose them if you keep slowing us down."

As displayed, though in his opinion the younger of the Proceran heroes was, for all that he was vastly irritating, more a symptom of the troubles than a cause. The Repentant Magister, whose true name was Nephele Eliade, visibly bit down on the sharp retort she equally visibly wanted to let out at the boy who'd been needling her for hours now. The Stygian was slow because she'd taken bad fall in the last scrap with the Prince of Fallen Leaves and magical healing could only help so much with bones, not because she was somehow lazy as was being implied. Now, that should have been the moment when the band's unspoken leader stepped in before tempers further rose. The Mirror Knight had brought these people together after all, and that implied a level of deference to his leadership. Instead, Christophe of Pavanie leaned closer to the Vagrant Spear and addressed her in a low voice. The look the Magister shot at his back was distinctly less than adoring. It must have been rather irritating, Hakram mused, deferring to something that essentially did not exist.

"How is your arm, Blade of Mercy?" Adjutant gravelled.

The redheaded boy started, constant in his surprise that Hakram could do anything but stand behind a human villain threateningly or eat village babies. Adjutant had known men and women who truly, genuinely hated his kind and so he'd not been all that ruffled by the Blade's casual bigotry. It was the way of thinking of a boy who'd been told orcs were not people and had never had occasion to question that before, not something running deeper. Hakram thought less of men who chided the likes of the Blade for speaking their opinion of his kind but privately shared in the belief, for at least the boy could be *taught*.

"It stings," the blue-eyed boy admitted. "But it is only pain."

"I am sure Lady Eliade could heal it further, if the sting is a distraction," Adjutant suggested.

The Blade of Mercy cast a look at the Stygian sorceress and bit his tongue, looking somewhat abashed at the implicit reminder that the only reason his arm wasn't bleeding meat was the Magister's healing touch.

"I would not ask her to waste her valuable magic on my discomfort," the Blade of Mercy stiffly said, inclining his head at the sorceress.

It was exactly the kind of answer someone with a disdain of magic trying to politely excuse themselves from healing would have used, but Adjutant suspected that when it came to the redheaded boy the words were genuine. Or close enough. Hakram had met two very different Blades of Mercy, after all. The first was a boy with Light gleaming in his eyes, spouting lines sounding suspiciously similar to those of the heroes of Proceran bodice-ripper novels and very much trying to act like one of those heroes. The other was an awkward redheaded boy, out of his depth and painfully aware of it. He found it easier to pity the latter than the former, for all that they were one and the same.

The Maddened Keeper, further behind, let out a harsh bark of laughter at the about-face but did not speak. That she did not contribute much of anything was, to Hakram's eyes, a contributing part of this mess: there was an element missing to their band, the Callowan Named's aloofness withholding an influence that would have stabilized matters even if it was negative – a designated enemy, after all, would have given the Blade someone to focus his grandstanding against. The Magister offered Adjutant a discreet incline of the head in thanks when no one else was looking, which the orc did not hesitate in returning. It was a rare thing for him to have high opinion of a heroine before meeting her, but the Repentant Magister had been an exception. How could he not hold a woman who'd spurned the slavery she was raised to in high esteem? If Catherine intended to take this one as a consort he could only approve.

"Adjutant," the Mirror Knight called out from the front, "if we might have a word?"

Hakram put some spring to his step, catching up to the two in front as the Vagrant Spear moved to the side so he might stand between them. Those two were significantly easier to read than the rest, but in a way twice as hard to understand. Adjutant, in theory, knew much of the Vagrant Spear from Indrani's reports – which, while usually written in sloppy drunk handwriting with some of the filthiest limericks he'd ever seen slipped in here and there, always seemed to cover enough the important parts thoroughly enough he couldn't actually complain about it to Catherine – and her equally informative tendency to shamelessly gossip after she had a few drinks in her.

He knew that Sidonia was from the city of Alava, from one of the lesser lines of the Blood related to spears and considered as related to the Champion's Blood even though in practice their skills had much more in common with the Slayer's Blood. A political issue, he'd been made to understand. Hakram knew that

Sidonia was strictly interested in men, could kill skillfully with both hands and seemed to have some Name-driven taboo against wearing shoes of any sort. None of this, though, helped him understand the mercurial brew of affection and dislike she related to the Mirror Knight with, or why it seemed to spin the man's head around so much. Half the time the man seemed to crave her good opinion, the other half he seemed to court actively spiting it. It was probably about sex, which humans keeping to the House of Light tended to make a lot more complicated than it needed to be.

"I have heard that the Woe fought mighty battles against the Seasons of the Splendid," the Vagrant Spear said. "Do you have insights to share about the nature of our foe?"

Adjutant considered that, for a moment.

"The Prince of Fallen Leaves is weak, for one of his title," Hakram replied. "And the court he belongs to should be Autumn."

The orc cast a curious look at the Mirror Knight, who he'd expected would have known much of this. The 'Elfin Dames' living in a lake the man was supposedly sworn to defend sounded very much like fae, or something close enough it hardly mattered.

"The Fair Folk are a weakness of mine," Christophe of Pavanie boldly volunteered. "My shield will not reflect their works, and their illusory wiles are effective against even my protections."

"Your oath protects your mind from glammers and manipulations," the Vagrant Spear dismissed.

"It does not," the Mirror Knight curtly said.

Sidonia of Alava looked surprised, by Adjutant's reckoning, but not by the curtness.

"You once told me-"

"I know what I said," the Mirror Knight grunted, looking away, "yet I repeat: my oath will not protect me."

The Levantine looked confused, for a moment, then a wicked grin split her lips.

"Are you telling me you finally lost your-"

"I would recommend that the Repentant Magister provide protective enchantments against glamour, if she can," Hakram interrupted. "The stronger fae do not usually bother with deception, but once cornered they'll break habit if they lack the strength to win otherwise."

Something like gratitude gleamed in the Mirror Knight's eyes at the distraction that'd been provided.

"Have you fought Autumn before then, Adjutant?" he asked.

"No," the orc gravelled. "But it is the spawn of Summer broken, and I have fought Summer enough."

The dream that the King of Winter had seeded in Catherine after titling her in his court had been a difficult thing to sparse even though her recollection of it was vivid, because it was not truly a single dream: it was the recollection of a cycle's shape, one so old and primordial that mortals mind found it difficulty to truly grasp. There had been lessons to learn from it, though, and Hakram Deadhand had committed them to memory.

"The Lady tells marvelous tales of the battles against Summer," the Vagrant Spear agreed.

It took Hakram a moment to grasp that she was talking about Indrani, simply using the same term Indrani herself slipped into whenever talking about the Ranger. Interesting, he mused. Archer might not be interested in making a legacy for herself, but that did not mean she wouldn't end up making one regardless.

"I'll ask Nephele if she can weave such enchantments," the Mirror Knight said. "Thank you for your advice, Adjutant."

"It was my pleasure," the orc replied.

The Mirror Knight retreated further back with eagerness, leaving Adjutant alone with a still-grinning Vagrant Spear. That grin was directed at him, now, like she expected him to pat her on the back for having put the Proceran hero to flight.

"Now is not the time to make sport of him," Adjutant bluntly said. "We're headed into a hard fight."

"You said the prince was weak," Sidonia replied. "Have you not defeated stronger royalty of the Splendid?"

"As part of a band containing the Black Queen and the Hierophant," Hakram flatly replied. "And even then, it was a close thing."

And that was the thing that had his hand itching, wasn't it? Metaphorically speaking. After so many years among the Woe, where Catherine steered and inspired and mediated, having his Name attached to this walking mess was making him restless. His very nature was urging him to *fix* this band so that at least they'd cease bleeding each other with their sharp edges. It wouldn't even be difficult, he knew, to untie the most pressing of the knots. If the Mirror Knight ceased focusing on the Vagrant Spear

he'd start taking the Blade of Mercy closer in hand, which would free the Repentant Magister to be a moderating influence on the band. All it would take was establish some sort of accord between Christophe and Sidonia, terms of interaction they could keep to instead of constantly pushing each other.

"You underestimate us," the Vagrant Spear said.

"You overestimate yourself," Adjutant frankly replied. "The only reason there hasn't been a casualty on our side so far is that the fae aren't here to fight us."

That struck her in the pride, as it'd been meant to. Indrani had coddled her four too much, they'd started to get ahead of themselves. The Vagrant Spear, the blooming pattern of blue on grey on her face tightening as she scowled, turned to him with a straightened back and tight grip on her spear. Trying to make it so he was not looming so tall above her.

"The Lady bats you around when you spar, I hear," she challenged, baring pale teeth.

Hakram Deadhand did not bare his own teeth, posture or swagger. He simply looked at Sidonia of Alava, calmly, and considered how long it'd take him to kill her if he was serious about it.

"You are the not the Archer, child," the Adjutant simply said. "And if you challenge me again, I will rip your fucking throat out."

The younger woman stared at him for a long moment, then shivered.

"Apologies, Lord," the Vagrant Spear said, briskly dipping down her head. "I should not swat at him while we head into battle, it does us all disservice."

"I don't know what stands between you two," Hakram said, and raised a hand to stop her when it looked like she might tell him, "and I do not particularly *want* to. There will be time to pursue it after the fae are scattered, Sidonia. Until then, the Mirror Knight holds command."

The Vagrant Spear threw him a sardonic look.

"As you say, Lord Adjutant," Sidonia said, tone a tad dry.

The orc decided not to address that. There was only so much blood you could squeeze from a stone.

"Are we close?" he asked instead.

"Soon," the Vagrant Spear said. "We should get there ahead of the Splendid, if they took the main halls."

"Good," Adjutant said, baring his fangs in approval.

He slowed his stride, leaving Sidonia alone in the front and sliding into the conversation that had been forming behind him. As expected, with the Mirror Knight there to impress the Blade of Mercy was significantly more personable. Without the needling to interrupt, Lady Eliade skillfully steered the conversation away from what she'd been asked, an enchantment that would perfectly resist glamour, to make it seem like the Mirror Knight had instead requested something she could achieve, an enchantment that would allow someone to tell if they were under the throes of glamour. When properly angled, the four Named could associate without wounding each other. But there were still only four, Hakram noted, as the last member of the band of five had stayed aloof and behind all this time.

The Maddened Keeper's long and unkempt hair did much to hide her face, but Adjutant would have been able to peg her stare as cool and distant even if he'd not spent the last few years learning the nuances of human expressions. That one watched and missed nothing, but she kept her peace. She was Callowan, but from the times before the Empire had ruled it and so little like the Callowans that Hakram knew. There was a sense of... threat to her, one that had the orc's instincts apprehensive. To his senses, to his Name, she felt like a predator waiting to strike. She was no fighter, the earlier scraps with the fae had proved that, but the Maddened Keeper had also swallowed whole a cloud of decay that'd powdered rock and would likely have killed the Blade of Mercy if it'd been allowed to spread. In a senses she reminded him of Vivienne, in the sense that she was clearly familiar with violence but just as clearly not trained in it – but there ended the similarities, as no prince of the fae had ever *very carefully* avoided being touched by Thief even at the height of her Name.

Adjutant slowed his steps even further, slipping at the back of band and matching his stride to the Maddened Keeper. She peered at him through oily bangs, unsmiling.

"We were never properly introduced," Hakram gravelled.

"So that's what you're used for," the Maddened Keeper said, voice apathetic. "The plate and the axe, the height – it all paints the wrong picture. They don't see it coming, that your brain's the most dangerous part of you."

She was not such a tall woman, the Keeper. Skinny thing, no real muscle to her, and though she had vigor it was the feverish kind: burning but not healthy. Whether it was with his hand of bone or the spectral one, it would have been child's play to snap that sparrow-like neck. So why was Adjutant's Name screaming at him that if he laid a finger on the Keeper he'd be snuffed out in the blink of an eye?

"If we are to be at odds, so be it," Adjutant said. "There are old wounds, between your people and mine. But there are more pressing needs, Maddened Keeper."

"Necessity's son," the woman said, tone gone velvet soft. "Whispering her sweet nothings. Stack, stack, stack – move around the stones and maybe one day the game will make sense. But the tower always crumbles, doesn't it? You'll not find me so easy to steal or pile, death's hand."

She cast him an unfriendly look through the ratty curtain of hair.

"Walk away, orc," the Maddened Keeper told him. "Lest I develop an interest in pulling at your seams."

Adjutant was not above recognizing that creeping sensation going up his spine as fear or heeding its warning. There were some that were beyond his ability to corral, and so to continue an attempt was to invite sanction. Villains that did not know their limits died young, and Hakram had too many labours unfinished to be able to afford delusions about his own ability. He walked away, not with undue haste but without lingering either, moving towards the centre of the band again. Hakram caught only snippets of what was being discussed, which turned out to be heroic gossip about the lingering rumours of the White Knight and the Witch of the Woods being romantically involved. He filed it away regardless, but before the subject could change the Vagrant Spear called them to a halt with a peremptory gesture. They had reached the end of a long hallway, which Adjutant found was leading down to a broad downwards slope, spiralling inwards oddly.

"We are here," the Vagrant Spear said. "The top of the Spins."

Quietly walking to the edge of the hallway, Hakram leaned down and studied the battlefield the band had picked with a frown. The Repository was largely used as a great warehouse for all the incoming supplies for the Arsenal and outgoing artefacts feeding the war machine of the Grand Alliance, which in most situations would mean a large room spreading outwards. The Arsenal, however, had been carved from the inside of a mountain: there was no difficulty in layering several of these warehouses atop each other, so long as they could all be accessed by wagon. The Spins were likely the part meant for that very purpose, a soft-sloped spiral leading into eight different broad hallways of different heights. Most of those would lead to warehouses, though the 'central' hall was likely to be the one heading deeper into the Repository. Towards the restricted sections, where war assets were being kept and the Maddened Keeper informed them all the fae were headed – though she couldn't tell them exactly *what* the fae were after. Speaking of the devil, she'd come to the fore at long last.

"The fae haven't come through here," the Maddened Keeper said.
"But we don't have long."

"I'll take the front," the Mirror Knight immediately said. "Lady Eliade, your sorcery will serve well from the heights and Antoine can serve as your escort. Sidonia-

He was making mistakes, Hakram thought, planning like his magical back-up was the Witch of the Woods instead of the Repentant Magister – whose sorceries lacked bite, and the artefacts she used to make up for it tended to require shorter distance.

"I can go on the frontline with you," the Blade of Mercy interrupted, "the Vagrant Spear can see to the Magister's protection."

"I strike, I do not defend," Sidonia of Alava flatly said. "That is the nature of my Bestowal. This plan is foolish."

"Perhaps the Adjutant could see to my defence as I weave sorceries from closer," the Repentant Magister suggested. "You are well-versed in such duties, Lord Hakram, if I recall correctly?"

Catherine had begun needing a flanker once more since her return from the Everdark, so Nephele Eliade was not wrong. That said, Hakram was by far the most durable of the Named here after the Mirror Knight so frankly speaking he should be at the man's side when the fae began taking the gloves off instead of out back with the Repentant Magister.

"I am," Adjutant said. "But we have the advantage of surprise. It would be wasteful not to at least attempt an ambush."

The Mirror Knight blinked in surprise, while the Blade of Mercy stared at him in undisguised distaste.

"That would be dishonourable," the redheaded boy told him, as if addressing one slow of wit.

"The Adjutant has it right," the Vagrant Spear grunted. "You don't meet a raiding party on open ground, you turn the raid on them."

"They have the advantage in numbers," Lady Eliade noted. "It would be wise to try to remedy that as quickly as possible."

"The Levantine and the mage, arguing in favour of ambush," the Blade of Mercy sneered. "How surprising."

Christophe of Pavanie straightened.

"No chivalry was offered in the attack, none be offered in the defence," the Mirror Knight said. "It would be best of the prince could be slain swiftly, the rest might buckle."

"*Christophe*," the Blade of Mercy protested.

"Honour offered to the dishonourable is gold tossed into the river," the Mirror Knight replied. "Both the Adjutant and I can afford a long drop without any trouble, we might as well leap. Sidonia and Antoine flanking the hall, Lady Eliade on the slope overlooking?"

"Agreed," the Vagrant Spear nodded.

Hakram rumbled in approval himself. Keeping himself and the other heavy back might seem counterintuitive, but that way they'd be able to more easily pick out a fae high noble to tie up. There were mutters of approval from the rest.

"I will go with the Repentant Magister," the Maddened Keeper said, and none gainsaid her.

With the bare bones of the plan agreed on, all that was left was preparations.

"Gather close," Nephele Eliade ordered. "And don't move, it will make laying the enchantments much harder."

Adjutant had heard much of providence, the golden luck of heroes, but rarely had he wished for its arrival. He did today, though, because if they were to make through this without corpses on the ground a dollop of providence would very much be required.

—

The first fae to arrive reminded Hakram of a dragonfly.

All shiny carapace in shades of blue and long wings, with a long halberd in her hands, she cast a look around but after a long moment it appeared she could not see through the illusions that the Repentant Magister had woven around the flankers. *The Lady of Cooling Nights*, Adjutant recognized. Coming after the outrider, the vanguard should be next. The first fae whistled softly, the melody of it haunting, and two more fae slunk in. Though the orc was familiar with the sight of them, their titles remained unknown. Their unnaturally tall bodies and long limbs, though, could not be mistaken — neither could their skin, pale as bone, or the sharp spears of ivory they held. Pale wings bloomed and they scattered upwards, Hakram's fists tightening against the handle of his axe as he hoped none of the heroes would be spooked into striking too soon. A beat passed and none of them moved, to his relief.

The Prince of Fallen Leaves' court strolled in afterwards, riding at a leisurely on great white horses. Three lancers of what Adjutant suspected was Autumn's equivalent to the Immortals of Summer and the Sword of Waning Day for Winter, their scale armour fashioned to look like a thousand fallen leaves but their lances wickedly sharp and their horsemanship unnaturally skillful. Then the Countess of Still Amber, half a statue and dressed in her namesake from head to toe, and the Duchess of Red Sunset – blinding to look at, which had made the Mirror Knight the only one who could withstand her up closer. The company slowed, only to be joined a few moments later by two more fae. The Duke of Unrelenting Landslide, looking like his armour had been carved out of granite by an artist and his massive morningstar hefted over his shoulder, was simply too heavy for a horse to be able to bear him. He towered tall enough he could keep up with the last fae's mount, however.

The Prince of Fallen Leaves himself was of a dark grey-brown tone, wearing loose court clothes in tones of burnt orange that subtly evoked the membrane of a leaf by the cut and cloth, and on his brow rested a heavy crown of burnished copper. Bearing a slender longsword of what looked like rotting wood, he offered a permanent faint smile under pale orange eyes. Yet for all that the fae looked more like a dandy out on ride than a prince of the fae, Adjutant knew him to be wickedly fast on his feet and seemingly impossible to wound: any cut made on him would begin spilling fallen leaves, as if he were a sack filled with them, until it closed and left no scar behind. The Lady of Cooling Nights landed at the prince's feet, kneeling.

"My prince, all the halls seem to lead here," she reported. "Shall we assemble the court and sally forth?"

They'd split their forces, the orc realized. Given the sometimes maze-like lay of the Arsenal, it made sense that pathfinders would have been needed. Especially if they were after more than the sword made out of the Saint's corpse, as Hakram suspected they were. The Bard would have needed something to put them in her debt before they came here, or more likely *someone*. Now was the time to strike, Adjutant thought. Before some fae happened to see through their illusions, and before more of them gathered here. The Mirror Knight might cotton on to that, he considered, but there was one of their company a great deal more used to raids and that was...

The Vagrant Spear blinked into existence, grinning with all her teeth and spear screaming with the Light as it tore right through the Lady of Cooling Nights' throat.

"Honour to the Blood," Sidonia of Alava gleefully shouted.

Chaos broke out in the moment that followed, the fae all aflutter at the sudden attack. Adjutant kept a calm eye on the situation,

looking for his opening. The Blade of Mercy revealed himself with a hoarse shout, greatsword glinting with Light as it carved through both a lancer and its mount in a single stroke, and a heartbeat later the Repentant Magister fired her sorcery into the mess. The power gathered to strike at their ambushers by the fae, a panoply of titles and abilities, was sucked into a small spinning orb of gold that then blew up in a pulse of pure sorcery at the height of the chest of all those mounted. Only one of the lancers was caught and blown off its mount, the others all dismounting in time, but with that trick Lady Eliade had bought the rest of the band another heartbeat of advantage.

"I will engage the prince," the Mirror Knight's voice murmured, though coming from empty air.

Adjutant simply grunted in reply, wary of being overheard himself, but picked his own target before leaping. The whistle of the wind against his face was pleasant, as to his side a thrown spear of ivory struck at what should have been emptiness – but bounced a mirror shield, revealing a steady-eyed Mirror Knight falling with his silver sword already in hand. Below them the tall, pale fae who'd not thrown its spear instead leap up on pale wings and flew towards the Magister. The two remaining lancers were stuck against the side of the hall, moved there impatiently by the greater fae around them as they made room to fight, but already the Duchess of Red Sunset was beginning to emit searing light. Adjutant looked away, guiding his fall with his shield and landing a heartbeat later on the head of the Countess of Still Amber, knocking off her horse in surprise and rolling away before her petrifying curse could begin eating at his boots.

Shield rising as he rose, Adjutant brought up his axe just in time to strike the side of a massive morningstar as it was swung down at him, pushing the blow to the side enough that it shattered the ground instead of his skull and shoulder.

"You again," the Duke of Unrelenting Landslide said, voice sounding like a thousand stones grinding against each other. "It seems you did learn to fear your betters last time, orc."

Hakram Deadhand rolled his shoulder, limbering the muscle he'd almost just pulled, and bared his fangs at his foe.

"Yes," the Adjutant growled, "let us talk, fae, of *betters*."

Interlude: Concert

"A problem that cannot be solved by brute strength can still be destroyed by it."

– Dread Empress Massacre

The Duke of Unrelenting Landslide struck like a mountain made hammer, his stride shaking the earth and his war cry echoing as if sung through a gorge.

Hakram Deadhand stood before him in his burnt plate, armed only with a shield and a long axe, and breathed in deep of the cool air of this place. Fear, fear did not come. It should have, for his foe was a godling in the flesh while he was nothing but old steel and arrogance, but all that Adjutant felt was a quickening of the blood. A stirring. His enemy roared out a challenge, but the orc did not answer: the time for taunt and boast was past. Instead the Adjutant breathed in deep, and even as the Duke of Faerie brought down his morningstar he moved. A step to the side, as the mace shattered stone, and with keen eyes he darted forth. Axe high he struck, but the great fae batted his blow aside with his bare hand and laughed.

The morningstar swept across and Adjutant was not swift enough to leap over the blow, his shield taking it head on as he stood his ground. The whisper of the word was with him, and it had been but a casual stroke, and still he was sent flying a dozen feet back as his shield bent. Hakram barrelled into a horse, toppling it, and rolled away as the morningstar came down and splashed the mount's entrails over rock. Twice now he'd escaped death narrowly, and yet where was the fear? No, instead a strange and wistful joy had come over him. Like he had come home, after a long journey, or found an old place once beloved. His voice escaped his throat, neither challenge nor scream, instead softly and almost sadly singing in the Kharsum of his youth.

"I sing of spring, come winter deep
I sing of a dream beyond sleep."

Adjutant stepped to the side, the lilting and bittersweet pace of *The Old Raider* guiding his feet. Down the morningstar went, the Duke roaring in implacable anger, but Hakram was not there.

"The world was fair, when I was young," he sang.

The wind screamed, the morningstar sweeping, but Adjutant had begin moving before it. Under he went, knees creaking, and rose to his feet as the Duke turned to him in surprise.

"My grip was strong, my fang was long," the orc sang.

The proud creature did not shy away when he approached, pitting its own strength against the curve of Adjutant's axe, but this time when the Duke slapped away the blow Hakram flicked his blade with Name-strength and the fae screamed. Its hand was bloody, and a finger fell onto broken sone.

"And never," Hakram of the Howling Wolves sang, "did my axe falter."

—

The Archer sped up the stairs, steps soft as the breeze as her aspect warmed her bones like noonday sun: she could **Stride** to the end of the world, never faltering nor lost, so long as it shone within her.

She'd already strung her longbow, felt the enchanted wood tighten against her finger as she pricked her ear for the sounds of fighting above. There were five beats to the song, three and two at odds, and the fae were on the side with the numbers. A woman let out a hoarse scream of pain – the Blessed Artificer, Archer guessed – and so made it clear that the fae were on the *winning* side as well. She must hurry, she thought, reaching for the quiver at her side. Her fingers brushed through the touch of magic that would keep dust and water away from the wood, thumb sifting through the fletching until it found strix feathers and extracting that particular arrow. Black alder wood for the shaft, two centuries old so that the taste for shade and quiet would seep into the ambient magic, and an arrowhead of steel forged by a blacksmith born mute. It was a lurker's arrow, a slayer's arrow.

The strix feathers were simply a fancy of Archer's: the great flesh-eating owls of Waning Woods, after all, preferred to hunt by moonless night.

Her boots touched the second story moments later, arrow loosely nocked as she slipped in the shadow of tall pillars. The foes were righting on the footbridge that tied the hanging spire of crystal to the sides of the Belfry, though the fae wove in and out as was their way. Roland and the Artificer stood on one side, the black-skinned woman bleeding from a long cut across her chest and the Rogue looking like he was so deep in an aspect migraine he could barely see. Against them: a child of straw, an antlered huntress and what could only be a traitor. The Exalted Poet, Archer recalled. Caster, but in a tricky way and not entirely vulnerable up close. Very much human, however. The Archer carefully chose her vantage even as sorcery and Light, past trying to win, desperately tried to keep the two from dying against the three. She would only strike in complete surprise once, and so the shot must be made to count.

Angling herself so that the pillar would hide her from the side but she had a good view of the enemy's side, Archer breathed out. In the beat that followed, she fluidly drew the arrow past her ear and loosed in a single gesture. The lurker's arrow flew without making a sound or drawing the eye in any way, a wisp passing behind a flying tuft of straw from one fae being cleaved in two but inevitably, unerringly finding its target. Steel tore right through the Exalted Poet's throat, avoiding the spine but shredding the vocal cords. The man began choking on his own blood

but Archer was already moving, slipping from shadow to shadow as her enemies fell into disarray.

One, the Archer counted

—

His insides were aching, the roughness of continued **Use** having taken him past raw and into bleeding. Worse, Roland was beginning to lack precision: he could not longer properly seize artefacts or sorcery, sometimes fumbling and losing a precious few moments before finally succeeding. It was the sort of time a man in his position – in over his head – simply could not afford to lose if he was to keep avoiding an unfortunate end.

“No wall, no gate, no mighty keep.”

The Exalted Poet’s rasping voice called out another spurt of what a generous man might call poetry – a far cry from the fine verses of Candide Farstride or those of the princess-poetess Luna Trastanes, what was being inflicted on Roland’s ears – and the Rogue Sorcerer answered with the quickest thing he had at hand, a sizzling Liessen Chisel that spurted out from his sleeve. The Callowan spell was a ward-breaker by design, but it kicked like a horse and it would have shut up the Poet if it’d hit. If. The Lord of Plentiful Harvest leapt into the path, and thought the chisel split him in two it was straw and not blood that went flying: just another false body.

“Will turn away slumber’s cr-”

An arrowhead bloomed in the Exalted Poet’s throat, stealing his breath in a red gasp, and Roland de Beaumarais felt a startled, nervous giggle leave his throat.

“Rogue, what was that?” the Blessed Artificer asked.

Both fae scattered before she was done speaking, faces startled at the sudden bloodletting.

“The tune turns about, my friend,” the Rogue Sorcerer said, grin tugging at his lips.

The tightening of the Helikean bronze burr into the flesh of his flank warned him that power was being directed at his back and Roland threw himself down, scrabbling for a sharp enough blade that he’d be able to make some damage. That unexpectedly lethal jet of acid from the Dominion hedge mage, or perhaps hellflame confiscated from one of the Eyes? Golden power shivered above him, biting into the railing and sending shards of white-hot metal and stone flying every which way. His coat took most of it, three layers of impact-negation enchantment blown through in the blink of an eye, but it couldn’t cover everything. He swallowed a

scream when a piece of shrapnel shredded through his cheek and the corner of his lip, his aspect stumbling into the use of another power.

"Bite," the Rogue Sorcerer shouted.

Ice erupted with a shrill cry, singing of death.

—

"The days were long in summer sun," Hakram sang.

There was Adjutant, and there was all that went on around him. In the coolness of his mind, he found himself able to follow both without trouble.

The Duke of Unrelenting Landslide stamped his foot against the stone, the air shivering of the power as a rippled went through the ground as if a pond had been struck. Hakram swiftly circled to the side, waiting until he had come near one of the remaining lancers and the fae struck out at him by sword to measuredly leap up. The lancer's blade rasped against his plate, burnt by fires mightier than any of those burning here today, and Hakram dropped his axe to catch the fae by the wrist and toss him to the side, right onto the downwards arc of the morningstar come to pulp him. He landed in a crouch, blood flecked all over him, and snatched up his axe.

Light flashed, the Blade of Mercy screaming as his greatsword shattered the spear of the Countess of Still Amber, drawing from the fae a scream of rage as he swept her down from her horse with pure strength. The Vagrant Spear whooped madly as she leapt sideways, smashing a bare foot into one of the distorted pale fae's face and an elbow into the others' neck. The three of them stumbled to the ground in a pile, even as one of the lancers made to run through the now-prone heroine only for a tight circle of red sorcery to form around his neck and choke him with his own momentum, buying just enough time for the Mirror Knight to lightly dance away from the Prince of Fallen Leavens and casually split the head from the body in a single stroke.

"Even sorrow sweet, in battles won," Hakram sang.

The Duchess of Red Sunset burned with power, grown incandescent, and the Adjutant could not touch her. None of them could. Tough she was weaker in power than the prince himself, in some ways the nature of that power was harder to deal with. Now it was only a matter of time until she unleashed the fires, and those might turn the tide. Her attention needed to be drawn, focused. The orc retreated towards her, stoking the Duke's anger even further as he found himself denied his foe.

"Coward," the Duke of Unrelenting Landslide screamed

The insult passed over him like water on a duck's back. The Duchess saw him coming, not blinded by her own works, and even as behind him the Duke roared and smashed into the melee like an angry bull she struck at him. A whip of flame lashed out from behind the blinding incandescence, unnaturally twisting over his raised shield and sweeping down to seize his hand. But the whip found only bone there, crafted by a Warlock of which there had been few equals, and there was no pain to loosen his grip. Hakram Deadhand lunged forward and struck at the fae within burning light, only to be driven back. It did not matter, for he'd heard her snarl in anger at his insolence. These were predictable creatures, once their nature was grasped.

The whip withdrew.

"And never did my hand linger," Hakram sang.

The fires of a setting sun swallowed him whole, but Adjutant had followed the rhythm: quick as the Duchess was, she was not so quick that his soul did not first echo with the will to **Stand**.

—

The huntress had come to hunt her, Archer saw with blade-sharp amusement.

She was a tall one, that fae, painted red and white with antlers tearing out of the sides of her head and a long spear of bone in her hand. Light-footed, almost reluctant to use her wings, and now striding across the stone floors of the Belfry in search of the archer who'd fired at her ally from behind. Ear to ear and eye to eye, Archer knew, the fae's senses were likely better than hers. In a game of shadows, at first glance it might seem like the huntress had the advantage. Of course, that perception relied on one assumption: that, when she heard the string of the bow being pulled, the fae could move faster than Archer could loose. The Named's fingers went drifting through her quiver once more, finding the arrow she sought by the soft touch of the bellhawk feather fletching. Prodigiously loud birds, bellhawks, known to use their cry to startle animals into leaving their hiding places.

The purpose of the matched arrow was a little different, but not dissimilar in essence.

Crouched atop the stacks, overlooking the huntress from the distance, the Archer drew and loosed before a single breath's span could pass. The antlered fae's head swivelled, but before she could finish finding the arrow from the whistling sound the enchantment carved into the birch shaft was awakened by the touch of wind and a deafening cry erupted. The huntress winced in pain, her unnaturally sharpened senses coming back to haunt her, and that delay cost her. While the fae narrowly managed to recover in

time to catch the small glint of light on steel and swat aside the arrow, the second one – tipped in cold iron, a precaution she'd originally taken in case the Wild Hunt grew rebellious – that Archer had drawn and fired under the cover of the first found her thigh and struck true. The trick had been in the angle, aimed just so that the fae's peripheral vision would miss the second shot until it was too late. Even if the fae were magic made flesh, as Masego insisted, so long as they used human shape they shared the limitations of human eyes.

Two, the Archer counted.

The huntress screamed as the touch of cold iron spread through her veins like poison, ripping out the arrow only too late. It would not kill her, but she was slowed now. Weakened. And when the antlered fae looked atop the stacks, ready to unleash her wrath, she found only shadows there. Archer was gone, had been since the heartbeat that followed the second loosing. She did not need to stay to know whether her arrows had struck true.

It was with something like wariness that the huntress now eyed the open space before her.

—

The Rogue Sorcerer could feel it in the air, like a scent in the wind: the tide, it was turning.

The Lord of Plentiful Harvest snarled in anger, having been just a beat of the song too slow to escape the sudden blooming of the ice. His foot was frozen up to the knee, and with his childlike body even given his physical strength he was having a hard time finding the right angle to rip himself free. Roland was still panting even as he rose, he wouldn't make it in time, but he was not fighting alone. Adanna of Smyrna, bloodied but unbowed, turned a dark glare unto the fae they had each killed a dozen times only to see straw fly instead of blood. She was nearing exhaustion as well, sweat beading her brow and staining her clothes, but it was with a steady hand that she raised up a simple bundle of four twigs and crushed it in her grip. Four bolts of Light screamed to life, grasped tight and reflecting on her spectacles.

"Four," the Blessed Artificer said, "will be plenty enough for you."

Not bad, Roland, mused even as Adanna's hand came down and the Light thundered. It was well-known among Chosen that speaking the right phrase or challenge could nudge the odds of a blow landing in your favour, and this seemed like it might just pass muster. The Lord of Plentiful Harvest had already lost an arm to Adanna earlier, and today she was to be his bane for the four streaks Light melded together into a single great spear that tore through

his chest, burning its way through flesh and bone and whatever deceit lay at the heart of fae. The Rogue Sorcerer, sensing that the end of this was to come soon one way or another, touched a finger to one of the runes in his pocket. The bottom of the Slow Regret, that despicable piece of Stygian work, slapped against his palm and he withdrew the small clay statue depicting a crane.

"You *insects*," the Lord of Plentiful Harvest snarled, body visibly boiling in the wake of his wound. "I will see you annihilated for this."

He'd begun shedding strands of straw from the sides of the gaping hole the Artificer had burned, and with a shudder he contracted onto himself: becoming significantly smaller, yet whole again. *Have we been destroying true pieces of him this entire time?* Regardless Roland touched his bloody cheek and rubbed some of the redness against the side of the statue, watching it sink into the clay without a trace, then grimaced. The part that came after was not one he enjoyed.

The Rogue Sorcerer produced a knife, the same he'd used to bleed dry the Count of Green Apples, and with a ragged war cry ran towards the fae.

—

The flames of a dying sun seared him, scorched him, devoured him whole.

Hakram Deadhand should have been made ash, dust scattered on the wind, but he stood unbowed in the face of the wrath of the Duchess of Red Sunset. Like a statue made of conceit, he refused the fae's verdict and his aspect came smooth and deep at the call. It too, disapproved of the utter arrogance of that creature in believing her will was enough to end him. He bowed his neck to one woman only, and she had sent him out today to win. The fires waned, as all fires had and ever would, and when the last ember died the Adjutant stood still. Unmoved.

"I bore a crown once, of iron hewn," Hakram sang, and struck.

Through the blinding light still at the heart of the fae, Adjutant saw the recoil of dismay. His axe's edge cut through a whip of flame, a pretty trick but poor in defence, and found flesh beneath. The Duchess cried out in pain and he hammered her down on the ground, teeth bared. The orc felt a strong grip squeeze around his ankle, the Repentant Magister's enchantment warning him he was now under glamour. Without missing a beat, Hakram stepped back and closed his eyes. **Find**, he thought. *Find me my foe*. The aspect pulsed within him and blindly he swung, letting Creation guide his hand. The blow glanced off the side of a spear of ivory, a pale-skinned fae coming into existence with a sound like a shattered mirror.

"Flicker," the Blade of Mercy yelled.

In the heartbeat that followed he smashed into the pale fae's side, made entirely out of Light – it was a simulacrum, Hakram understood only when after cutting through the spear and tackling the glowing Blade winked out. The orc took the opening, shield smashing the Duchess' face when she tried to rise before he knelt atop her, axe rising. The incandescence flared, tossing him away in a torrent of flame but it had been enough. Already coming down, one eye wide open and burning from the refusal to close, the Vagrant Spear rammed her spear through the fae's open mouth, screaming in triumph. Hakram landed on his feet, steel boots shooting sparks as he slid to a halt.

"Earned riding," Hakram sang, "under autumn moon."

As if spellbound, the head of every single fae swivelled towards him. Unexpected, the Adjutant thought, but he could work with this. He rolled his shoulder, loosening it before all the howling Hells came for him.

"And never did my heart waver," Hakram Deadhand hummed.

—

Archer savoured the hesitation in the huntress' steps like fine wine, knowing it was the closest fae could come to true fear: the implicit recognition that there was something out there that could kill them, if it wanted to.

It was time to bring this to an end. First she allowed her boots to drag against the floor, the fae near instantly turning towards the noise and tossing a spear of blood-red power at the pillar Archer had been hiding behind. Stone shards and dust blew everywhere, but she'd already been moving. One, two, three steps even as the bellhawk arrow she'd reached for was knocked and loosed. The huntress went wild, charging forward, and though she parried the arrow in question with her bare hand the Archer had already released that second pulsing tension within her. The **Flow** that went beyond what earthly hands could master, hers to borrow for the shortest of whiles. Sometimes she wondered if that was what it felt like, to be the Lady. When everything fit perfectly, and you could place yourself within the parts of the world exactly the way you wanted.

There were twenty feet between the Archer and the huntress. Before one had been crossed, the second arrow was loosed: a slender thing of birch, that would have torn through the fae's left ankle were it not slapped aside by spear. Archer loosed the third arrow before the huntress was even done moving, and the cold iron tip tore through the fae's right shoulder. The enemy screamed in excruciating pain but strode forward. Seventeen feet left. The huntress had learned the trick, now, but it did not

matter: Archer had killed things like here before. Much as the fae wanted to ignore the fourth arrow she could not, for it was of cold iron and headed right for her throat. She twisted around, ducking low as she moved – fifteen feet – but the fifth arrow ripped right through her left knee before the spear could adjust to the lowered height. The huntress stumbled but stubbornly carried on.

The sixth arrow was loosed low, at her midriff, and the fae's back erupted with red wings. One bat of them was enough for the fae to drag herself up, the shot passing under her as she forced her body straight – ten feet – but the seventh tore through the left wing and her flight swivelled downwards. The huntress hit the ground but struck at the stone with the butt of her spear first, so that she would remain half-standing and half-stumbling forward when her feet touched down. Eight feet. A simple trajectory, and the spear was already occupied: the eighth arrow, the last cold iron tip Archer carried, punched through the fae's ribcage and into her heart. She stumbled forward a few steps, gasping, and raised her spear in a last effort. The Archer felt the flow leave her, the world become clumsy and blind once more, but even at her least she could see the span of that death.

Nonchalantly, she stepped to the side of the huntress blow and waited for the antlered fae to drop down with a plaintive scream of pain. Unmoved, Archer took another two steps forward and knocked a mundane arrow before turning. The blood-red power the huntress had gathered above her head did not defend her from the shot the Archer loosed a heartbeat after turning, punching through the back of the fae's skull.

—

One of the Rogue Sorcerer's ribs shattered as the little fae slapped his side, throwing him away like a ragdoll, and he screamed in pain. It wouldn't be enough, damn him, damn this damned statue and the damned sorcerer whose damned soul had thought it was a clever damned thing to make. At least some sort of spell could have been woven in to numb the pain but no, Stygian sorcerers were all bloody sadists. Exception made for Nephele, of course, was a delight unless she had a few drinks in her and reason to be displeased. Roland landed on the stone footbridge, which was not great for his already bruised back, and tried to hack away at the fae that'd flown over to him and was now dropping down. Sadly his knifeplay had gone somewhat rusty of late, and the Lord of Plentiful Harvest snapped the wrist holding the knife before landing on his ribs and shattering another few. Gods, the pain.

"Duck," the Blessed Artificer screamed.

Sadly, between the excruciating amount of pain he was in and the fact that the fae was standing atop his abdomen it had been fated

that Roland de Beaumarais was going nowhere. Which proved something of an issue when a bolt of Light struck him and not the Lord of Plentiful Harvest, who *had* been in a position to heed Adanna's advice. With a breathless scream of pain, the Rogue Sorcerer felt the power scythe through the last two layers of protection on his shirt and sear his skin. Not deeply, but he comforted himself with the knowledge that at least properties would be maintained.

"Cower," the childlike fae ordered, tossing a disk of golden power at the Blessed Artificer.

He then turned cruel eyes at the Rogue Sorcerer, freshly back on his feet, who met him gallantly with a raised knife.

"Adanna," he called out. "Still alive?"

"Yes," the Blessed Artificer panted back.

"Then prepare your sharpest blade," Roland de Beaumarais said. "This ends."

"In this," the Lord of Plentiful Harvest beatifically smiled, "you are correct. This ends, and it ends with you *screaming*."

The Rogue Sorcerer smiled, deeply relieved.

"Say what you will about Theodosian," Roland said, "but the little bastard would have seen it coming."

On that scathing assessment his fingers closed around the clay statue artefact still in his pocket, the Slow Regret. With a grunt he shattered the clay with his grip and pointed a single finger at the childlike fae. Before his foe could even blink a small thread of translucent sorcery connected them, and Roland screamed once more as his ribs *unsnapped*. The Lord of Plentiful Harvest turned surprised, pained eye on the Rogue Sorcerer, who grinned back mockingly. Roland's seared skin healed, while the fae screamed as the burning touch of Light ate at its chest.

"Artificer," he yelled. "Now is-"

"Soon," Adanna yelled back, tone distracted.

The Rogue Sorcerer's ribs unshattered once more, as the last if the wounds he'd taken since binding himself to the Slow Regret flowed through, and the fae broke out of the enchantment with a yell of triumph.

"Now," the Lord of Plentiful Harvest said, "you-"

He paused, looking up, and Roland followed his gaze. Above them, the crackling web of Light that had been preventing the fae from going up was gone. Instead a hundred glinting swords of Light

hung in the air, while the Blessed Artificer grinned a devil's grin at them both.

"Boom," Roland helpfully said, flicking a finger at the fae.

The swords came down and the world went white.

—

"Spring passed into summer song," Hakram sang.

His ankle was still being squeezed, a reminder that he was under glamour and could not trust all that his eyes told him. Yet he saw much, in the moment where the Court of Autumn tried to destroy him. The Maddened Keeper, laying the lightest of touches on one of the pale fae – it melted from the inside in the beat that followed, in too much pain to even scream. The Repentant Magister, throwing a bauble of silver at the Countess of Still Amber that froze her in place just long enough for the Blade of Mercy to cleave her in two. And Hakram saw, too, the wrath headed his way: a cloud of rot and decay, from the Prince of Fallen Leaves' hand, and single smooth pebble from the Duke of Unrelenting Landslide. Adjutant knew the latter would carry with it the strength of an entire avalanche and was likely to kill him on impact even if the former did not.

The Mirror Knight, unflinching, stood between the orc and the onslaught. Straight-backed, shield raised, the hero widened his stance.

"**Withstand**," Christophe de Pavanie said.

And though death struck at the Mirror Knight, he looked upon it in disdain and let it wash over him. It was an opening, Hakram thought as the rot split around the Proceran. They would not see him coming, not through that. The Adjutant did not embrace fury, for the Red Rage had never been in his blood. He reached instead for the cold, for the frozen bite, and let it flow through his veins. Strength filled his limbs, and he knew the **Rampage** had begun.

"Then summer into fall, headlong," Hakram sang.

The rot ate at his flesh as he leapt through it, but in the throes of his aspect that meant nothing. It was back, and he emerged from the cloud with his axe raised high. The Duke of Unrelenting Landslide blinked in surprise, but swung down the morningstar without hesitation. A step to the side, as the stone broke. The morningstar swung, but Adjutant had the measure of his foe now. And the swiftness to act on that measure. He leapt over the swing, and with all his might smashed his shield in the Duke's face. The fae rocked back, in pain, and took a hand off the morningstar to blindly swipe. Adjutant began to duck the

moment he landed, smooth and measured, and his axe sliced through the fae's heel. The Duke screamed out in pain, falling onto his knee, and there the orc was waiting.

"And I know what waits after," Hakram Deadhand sang, axe smashing through the Duke of Unrelenting Landslide's forehead.

Again and again he ripped free and swung, making a red mess of the fae's head, until the giant toppled at his feet and he breathed out. He chanced a look around him, finding that now only the Prince of Fallen Leaves still stood and that the band of five was surrounding him. Yet Hakram's ankle was still squeezed tight: a heartbeat later Sidonia struck at the fae, only for the illusion to shatter, and the orc grasped that there was worst yet ahead.

The prince was in the wind, and there was no one protecting the sword meant to slay the Dead King. The last two lines of the old song came to him, like a mournful warning.

*I sing of spring, come winter deep
I sing of a dream beyond sleep*

Interlude: Threads

"The finest exercise of war is to interrupt the enemy's plan. Therefore, the general without a plan is also without peer."
– Isabella the Mad, Proceran general

"Archer," Roland smiled. "It's damned good to see you."

Indrani flicked a glance at the ripped-up footbridge, large chunks of it either torched, cut or otherwise savaged beyond recognition.

"Same to you, Rogue," she replied. "You've had an interesting day, by the looks of it."

The rueful smile she got in answer to that was classic Roland, a touch of nonchalance facing the constant messes he seemed to get himself into. A tall, dark-skinned woman with those famous Wasteland golden eyes made her approach, skittish as a cat.

"Greetings, Archer," the Blessed Artificer stiffly said. "I am—"

"I know who you are," Indrani informed her.

She was not hostile in tone, even though the heroine seemed physically unable to help herself from picking fights with Masego whenever they were in the same room. Archer had no need to fight Hierophant's battles for him. Besides, she'd made some inquiries and judged that Adanna of Smyrna would stay within acceptable bounds even if she got the upper hand – nothing permanent,

nothing crippling. If nothing else, the Artificer would serve to make sure that Masego didn't get too soft during his years away from the front.

"Pick up the Poet and bring him down," Archer ordered them. "I want to ask him a few questions."

"You have a healer?" Roland asked, sounding relieved.

Someone had done a nasty turn on his cheek – heated metal, by the charred and bloody looks of that wound – so she could see why he'd be. The Artificer was bleeding as well, but it looked mostly like shallow cuts. Both heroes were exhausted, though, maybe a quarter hour away from the sense of danger fading and the shakes settling in instead. The Rogue Sorcerer had a few potions to delay that further, she knew, but odds were Cocky would have better stuff below.

"I brought the Concocter," Indrani said. "She's down there, examining the body."

"Only the one?" Roland probed, sounding surprised.

"It is the Black Queen's," the Blessed Artificer bluntly told her. "The fae said that she died and they cannot lie."

"Knowingly," Archer corrected. "They cannot lie *knowingly*. There's a body down there, sure, but I've my doubts."

If Indrani was right, though, it begged the question of where the Hells Catherine actually was. She wouldn't have left Roland and the Artificer to face enemies outnumbered without a good reason, or even just disappeared at all for that matter. Indrani had been sent out to get answers and she'd yet to bring them back.

"There will be another prisoner," Roland volunteered. "I crippled the Count of Green Apples and tossed him into the stacks on the western side of the first story."

Archer let out a low whistle, genuinely impressed. Fae didn't usually leg it when they'd come for a reason, as these clearly had, so if the Count hadn't come back then *crippled* must be something of an understatement.

"I'll pick him up, then," Indrani said. "Can the two of you handle the Exalted Poet?"

The Blessed Artificer was already kneeling at the man's side, she noted with approval, already getting down to work. Except the dark-skinned woman was grimacing in dismay, finger on the side of the traitor's neck.

"He's dead," Adanna of Smyrna said. "He has no pulse."

Archer blinked in surprise. She'd shot him in the throat, true, but she'd avoided the spine. She'd buy unconscious, she'd been banking on it really, but *dead*?

"Isn't he a Levantine hero?" Indrani said.

"He was a Levantine *poet*, Archer," Roland reminded her. "An occupation not habitually known for its physical fortitude."

"It isn't as if being born in the Dominion lends someone greater vitality," the Blessed Artificer waspishly said. "Though to my passing knowledge of medicine, he appears to have died from choking on his blood."

"Hells," Archer cursed. "I wanted to interrogate him. How dead is he, would you say?"

"... averagely dead?" Adanna of Smyrna hazarded.

"Not fresh gone," Roland noted. "If you're thinking of fanning a last spark with tonics, I'd say that stallion has left the pen."

Damn it, just when she finally *had* someone at hand who had those sorts of brews.

"Just toss him down, then," Indrani sighed. "Can't leave the body unattended, not with the number of potential necromancers in this place."

"He's a hero," the Blessed Artificer bit out angrily. "We can't just-"

"He was a traitor," Archer flatly interrupted, "and now he's a corpse. Carry him down in a tender embrace, if you feel like it, but I've no intention of lending an ear to your praise of a failed turncoat."

She shot a look at Roland.

"Don't linger," she said. "That's a nasty wound, best to get it seen to as soon as possible."

Archer did not bother with goodbyes, instead leaving them to make their decision on their own as she headed for the stairs. Much as it rubbed her the wrong way not to remove her arrows from the corpses, given how precious they were, it would have to wait. After going one story down she made her way around the side of the Belfry and found the fae the Rogue Sorcerer had handled, brow rising when she saw one of the Fair Folk outright unconscious. She'd seen their like wounded and dead by the hundreds, but *unconscious*? That was much rarer. What had Roland done to screw with it that badly? Screw with him, it turned out as Archer got close, but when she turned over the body – a longknife in hand, just in case – she started at the face.

"I know you," Archer muttered, brow creasing.

Whatshisname from the Battle of Dormer, wasn't he? The fucker who'd kept throwing fire at her and nearly burned Vivienne to death when he caught her flatfooted. The Duke of Something Something. Green Trees, Green Yews – no, that was some other bastard Cat and Hakram had murdered while she'd been out in southern Callow with Zeze – oh, Green *Orchards*! So the last time she'd seen that face it'd been on a Duke of Summer, one who should be thoroughly dead by now. Cat had been in a black mood that night and people didn't tend to walk those off. Much less turn up a few years later with a different name, yet here we were. That had *implications*, according to some of what she'd picked up lately.

Indrani had honestly paid only passing attention to this Quartered Season racket that Masego and Catherine had going on, doing her due diligence of going through everybody's things more out of habit than genuine interest, but she'd picked up a thing or two. The principle, as she understood it, had come from a theory Zeze put forward after the Twilight Ways were born and he got rid of the petty god in the back of his head: that the Court of Arcadia Resplendent, the one born from the wedding of Summer and Winter, was an entirely new entity and not something flowing directly from either Winter or Summer.

There were a bunch of complicated explanation for why that was, best left for others to dig into, but the heart of it was a division being made between 'power' and 'crowns', the former being the good stuff and the latter the formal mantle. Masego believed that Arcadia was one crown and Twilight another. Which meant that regardless of where 'power' had been accrued – mostly Arcadia with Twilight and the Crows splitting the difference, the theory went – there were still two 'crowns' up for grabs. It didn't matter if there wasn't much 'power' left behind either, the way Masego put it, because it was still a functioning godhead. Dried up, sure, but functional.

What he and Cat meant to make of it had been straight out of that brand of outrageous that tended to spring up whenever they collaborated on something: vicious to the bone and too clever by half. Instead of making a giant sharper or even a fine arrow for their good pal Indrani, they'd decided to make a gift. So what did it mean, this old face with a new name? Someone else would have to figure it out, she supposed, because it was beyond her.

"Might as well bring you down," Indrani mused, gazing down at the fae.

She was wary of waking up one of the fae and interrogating them without a warding specialist at hand, but Roland with a few potions in him might do in a pinch. There was a need for answers. She hoisted the fae over her shoulder, forcing her bow to the

side, and finished the trek back at the bottom of the Belfry. Cocky was kneeling on the floor, silver knife in hand as she studied the insides of the dead body she'd been left with, and only vaguely gestured in greeting when Indrani dropped the unconscious count.

"So?" Archer probed.

The Concocter withdrew her hands, stripping them of some sort of gauzy transparent film they'd been coated in and throwing it aside. It melted a beat later, leaving behind only the filth and blood it'd soaked up.

"I was going to have to ask you if the Black Queen was misassigned, but it won't be necessary," Cocky bluntly said. "Whoever this boy was, he was not finished going through puberty."

Indrani felt her shoulders loosen. She'd believed, she had. Believed that Cat wouldn't go out like this, to a nobody and a few fae, that this plan had been of her own making and that meant she still had hands to play. But Archer also remembered the stillness of ice around her, the utter silence of creeping death, and shed known that sometimes there just wasn't anything you could do. Sometimes the world got the last laugh, and all you could do was take it. *But not today*, she thought, breathing out. She wouldn't be losing anyone today.

"Keep that between us," Archer said. "You couldn't identify the body."

"I know the Rogue Sorcerer professionally," Cocky pointed out. "He is aware I am not, in fact, a complete imbecile."

Indrani swallowed the theatrical *my Gods, how long have you been lying to him?* that'd come to her tongue unbidden, an old habit not quite shed, and forced herself to focus.

"He'll also know to keep his mouth shut," Archer replied. "We understand each other."

While the dark-haired Named had no idea why Cat wanted to pass herself off as dead, she didn't feel all that inclined to spread knowledge of the trick around now that she'd figured it out. Presumably there were reasons for this, another round of deep games that Indrani had long given up trying to figure out. Archer could catch the scent a story when it was around, and she'd been taught how to avoid those that'd get her killed, but she just didn't have the knack for that sort of thinking that Catherine did. It took a peculiar sort of madness, to master those arts, and not of a sort she envied.

"Did you get another prisoner upstairs?" the Concocter asked. "I have serums readied, if it is the case."

"He, uh, died," Indrani said.

A beat passed.

"You killed him, didn't you?" Cocky said, and it wasn't really a question.

"Let's not get hung up on who did what," Archer evaded. "Do you have something that would compel fae to speak?"

Her brow rose, and she now seemed interested.

"Magically compel, no," the Concocter said. "But there are other ways. I have a substance than should be able to lull him into a pleasant trance and make him receptive to inquiries."

"That'd do it," Indrani approved. "They're hard to break with pain, but they're not immune to gentler methods. Thanks, Cocky."

The purpled-eyed woman eyed her with something like wary surprise, as if expecting a barb to follow, and only nodded after a few moments had passed.

"I can wake him up now, if you'd like," the Concocter said, gesturing at the prisoner.

"Best to wait for the Rogue Sorcerer for containment," Archer replied.

As it happened it was not long before Roland and the Artificer were there, the two of them carrying the Exalted Poet's corpse by the arms and legs. The arrow had been removed, but the wound was visible.

"Really, Indrani? An arrow to the throat?" Cocky murmured. "Quite the capture method."

"He's Dominion," Archer defended, "they're supposed to be hardy."

"I'm sure that fact was a great comfort while he choked to death on his own blood," the Concocter replied, sounding deeply amused.

Everyone was getting snippy, these days. The heroes set down the corpse without much ceremony – it was heavy and they were tired – before Roland straightened his coat and the Artificer wiped her hands clean on her apron.

"Rogue Sorcerer," Cocky greeted the Proceran as she rose to her feet

She let a full moment pass.

"Artificer."

Indrani, no stranger to the art of petty slights, had to smother a smile at the refinement of that particular bit of pettiness.

"Concocter," the Blessed Artificer replied, tone flat.

"Let's get that cheek healed up," Archer cheerfully said. "Maybe something for the fatigue as well, unless Rogue's been drinking?"

"I refrained," Roland said. "I would be in your debt, Concocter, if you would oblige."

That stroked Cocky's fur the right way, as courtesies tended to, and she got to work without quibbling. It was quick work sewing up the cheek with needle and thread then applying the salve and having him drink the potion that back in Refuge they'd called the Pardon. It was red and thick, almost more molasses than liquid, and it smelled of death – which is was partly made of, Indrani suspected, or at least flesh – but within moments of drinking it Roland was looking better. The bleeding on his cheek ceased and the charred skin began to flake, though this wasn't a miracle brew: skin did not grow back, and it'd take more than a drink to fix his carved cheek muscles.

The Artificer got seen to as well, if less comprehensively, with a small vial ending the bleeding in her cuts and an elongated pill for the pain. The heroine grimaced as she swallowed the latter, not without reason: Cocky didn't coat hers in honey or extracts, unlike a lot of medicine-peddlers.

"Feeling up to a bit of a talk, Sorcerer?" Indrani asked.

"What about?" Roland asked.

"Not you and me," she laughed, then pointed a boot at the unconscious fae. "I've questions for our friend here."

"I can run containment, if you want," the Rogue Sorcerer said, "but it should not be necessary. He should barely be more physically capable than a human, at the moment."

Archer's brow rose. While she was damned curious about how he'd pulled that off – everyone and their sister knew Roland had sticky fingers when it came to tricks and artefacts, but there was quite a leap between that and hollowing out a Count of Autumn – that seemed like it might infringe on the nature of his aspects, and that... just wasn't something you *asked*. It was fair game if heard, or fought, but asking someone to just hand out one of three words at the heart of them a different story.

"Keep an eye out anyway," Indrani said. "Cocky, the fae's all yours."

"Joy," the Concocter muttered, rolling her eyes.

Backtalk or not, it was with poorly veiled eagerness she knelt at the Count of Green Apples' side and forced his mouth open. Odds were she didn't often get to ply her trade on the likes of him, Archer mused. Her own eyes wandered a bit, coming to rest on the dead body that was not Catherine's. Roland hadn't asked, though she suspected that when they got a moment to talk without people to overhear he would, and evidently the Blessed Artificer still believed herself to be correct. Whose body was it? It couldn't be the Fallen Monk's, she thought, even though it was his knife that Cocky had taken out from the neck and laid down next to the body.

Wait, why was the knife there?

Indrani could recognize it on sight, she'd seen it make quite a few cuts. The Monk had always been sharp in a bad way, but she hadn't thought that he would... Well, you couldn't always see it coming. There were nights ahead of her where Archer would examine whether she ought to have seen that betrayal coming, but not now. Last blood had not been spilled. *The knife was placed here so I could see it*, Indrani decided. The rest of her band was here, but dispersed and unlikely to come here in the Belfry without reason. Cat must have left it there as a message. Not recrimination, that wasn't her style. It'd been stuck in the corpse, though, so what was it that was important about the corpse?

Oh, Indrani thought, and put it together. *You're listening through it, aren't you? You're waiting for my report and for whatever we dig up here.* Breathing out, Archer knelt by Cocky's side even as the fae's eyes fluttered open – glazed, unseeing – and Roland took position behind the Count of Green Apples.

"It's working?" she asked the Concocter.

"It should," Cocky said, finger forcing open an eye and looking at the dilation. "Try asking him a question."

"Who are you?" Archer asked.

"I am the Count of Green Apples, of course," the fae said, sounding surprised.

"Dreamlike state," Cocky said, sounding satisfied. "It took hold properly."

Indrani nodded her thanks, then took to interrogation.

"Who sent you here?"

"The Prince of Falling Leaves," the fae said.

The Blessed Artificer flinched at the words, all eyes save the Count's turning to her in surprise.

"Care to share?" Archer lightly said.

"The Hunted Magician," Adanna of Smyrna replied. "He's had dealings with that creature before."

Fuck, Indrani thought. This better not end up being blamed on Cat because a villain had been the way in and not one of Above's shiny helmets. Interesting that the Artificer would know that, though. She'd have to remember to look into it later.

"Why did you come to the Belfry in particular?" Archer asked.

"To destroy the works of the Hierophant," the Count said. "And so settle half our debt."

Indrani's fingers clenched in triumph. That sounded like a proper scapegoat being set out for her, didn't it?

"Who is the debt owed to?"

"The Wandering Bard."

Cocky stiffened at her side, beginning to grasp the depths of how badly she'd miscalculated by making a bargain with the Intercessor. The Artificer looked mostly confused, Roland grim.

"Where did the prince go?" Indrani asked.

"To get his due," the Count of Green Apples proudly said. "To break the sword."

And there it was, Autumn's plan laid out. The dark-haired killer rose to her feet, stretching as she did.

"Archer?" the Rogue Sorcerer tried.

"Knock him out and bind him," Indrani ordered. "We're got work to do."

Now, Archer thought, how was she going to keep giving her report to a dead body subtle? Any notion of her guess there being wrong was put to rest, after all, by the way the corpse's neck had slightly turned so it would be able to *watch* the interrogation.

—

Christophe de Pavanie took the blow without flinching, angling his shield so that it would slide to the side and giving answer with a slice of his sword. The fae drew back with a scream, having tasted of the Light running along the blade's edge and found it to be a thing of pain, and in a flash of orange-red wings it withdrew. The creature fled down the hallway to the right, the faint squeeze against the hero's ankle informing him glamour had been woven against him, but the Mirror Knight did not

pursue. He halted his steps, for though Christophe himself was not tired in the slightest the same could not be said of all his companions.

Lady Eliade was suffering the worst of it, by his reckoning. Between the wounded leg, the fresh break of her shoulder by one of the Lords of Dwindling Warmth and the exhaustion of continued spellcasting, she was reaching the end of what her body could take. She might be able to use a few more trinkets, but no more great spells. The Repentant Magister was not like the Witch of the Woods, a war mage meant for the killing fields. Her gifts were gentler in nature, for all her sordid past, and she grew exhausted significantly more quickly than her savage counterpart. Sidonia was helping her keep pace, the Vagrant Spear the only one among them confident she could react swiftly to ambush even one-handed. Frustratingly, Sidonia had also refused healing after looking directly at the Duchess of Red Sunset with an eye that was now a blackened ruin.

Christophe was not certain whether she was refusing because he'd been the one to suggest healing or because some fool Dominion code of honour forbade it, but neither answer would do anything to abate his anger over the matter.

Antoine was keeping pace for now, slightly behind and to the Mirror Knight's left as was their habit, but he could recognize that his compatriot was quickly headed towards collapse as well. The Blade of Mercy's nature was to prove dangerous beyond his years, as was only proper of a young man the Saint of Swords herself had once deemed 'built for killing Damned', but though his strength was explosive it was also short-lived. He'd used **Kindle** earlier, so by now he should be drawing on true Light and not the one contained within his aspect: the way Antoine heavily relied on Light and Choosing to move and react meant he was now headed faster towards collapse with every fight. He'd used up **Flicker** as an offensive strike, too, so he wouldn't be able to use it as a life-saving trick. That fact would be weighing on him, a lingering distracting fear.

The man Antoine had used the boon to protect was near spent as well, Christophe suspected, though the Adjutant hid it better than most. The orc had to have called on at least two aspects when tangling with the Fair Folk in that last melee, and he was slower on his feet now if you knew what to look for: the Adjutant was simply tall enough that even slowed his stride was quicker than most humans'. That was ill news, as the Mirror Knight was aware that Hakram Deadhand had not been a stranger to their successes thus far. The orc could not be called silvertongued, he did not have the... cunning mien for that, but he had a calming and orderly way about him. Christophe, who half the time seemed to infuriate when he meant compliment and praise when he meant to insult, could only envy that.

He even envied the man's Name, he would admit to himself. Though like him the Adjutant had been blessed with endurance, unlike him the orc was just as deadly on the attack. It was an impious thought, to envy one of the Damned, and half-heartedly Christophe chided himself for it. A lot of what he'd believed to be truth in the beautiful shade of the lakeside of orchards of Pavanie had not taken well to the harsher glare of the world beyond them.

Of the Maddened Keeper he thought little, knowing from Cleves that she hardly ever tired – it was as if her body resisted any change at all, be it good or bad. Christophe also knew that she was no comrade in the shield wall, no sister-in-arms. She would come and go as she wished, and though she did the work of Above in swallowing whole the evils that she did the manner in which she bound those within her made her not unlike the carrier of a sickness: there was nothing that the Keeper kept within her that was not a mere finger's touch away from Creation. Had she not been in the city when he gathered Chosen to head out to the Arsenal and end the plot revealed to him, he likely would not have sought her out. Yet she'd been invaluable in navigating the Twilight Ways and finding a path into the Arsenal that would not take them months and months to travel. In some ways he sympathized with the Keeper: her Choosing, like his, had made her into someone to use instead of someone to honour.

"Keep your guard up," the Mirror Knight said. "We should be nearing the Severance."

"It might have been broken by the time we arrive," Antoine said, tone bleak.

"They would not still be ambushing us if that were the case," Adjutant said, his voice rough as stone.

A far cry from that eerie, beautiful tune he'd sung in some Praesi tongue as the fae stormed around them.

"They must be buying time for the prince to break through the wards," the Repentant Magister said. "Those were put up by the finest mages in the Arsenal, they won't fall easily."

Obvious. That had been *obvious*, so why hadn't he seen it? All these blessings, but what were they really worth in his hands? The Dames had chosen him, back home, but he'd wandered a long way from that home. Would they choose him again, he wondered?

Somehow he doubted it.

"We push on with all haste," the Mirror Knight grimly said. "We cannot allow a weapon that might be able to take the Dead King's head to be broken."

No life here was worth that price. That blade might save hundreds of thousands of lives, *millions*. Some of the Named would balk at what he'd said, or perhaps how bluntly he'd said, but it was the truth nonetheless. What was one Chosen, in the face of that many innocents? Or even all five of them, and the Damned one too. It might rub them raw, to hear it starkly said, but it was Christophe's people who were dying in droves holding the fronts. It was his countrymen who'd been forced to flee their homes and now sickened and despaired in great refugee camps, who gave up harvest and coin to keep Calernia from Keter's reaching grasp. So often he'd had to watch his people beggar themselves with gratitude as the foreign armies that'd come to lend their aid, and the sight of it sickened him.

Whose lands was it that were burning, bleeding, trod upon by the dead? The Principate had been made into the shield of the rest of the continent, just like he'd been made the shield for the rest of the Chosen: they were both expected to keep taking the hits and keep their mouth shut, as if it were an *honour*. No, the Mirror Knight would spend every life here without hesitating a beat if it meant saving the innocent. There was more to being Chosen than Light and tricks: it was a burden as well as a privilege. Too often only the privilege was remembered.

"We don't all have your... stamina," the Vagrant Spear said, tone faintly mocking.

Or was it lurid? He itched to answer but took hold of himself. Now was not the time for this.

"Then some of us will pull ahead, and the others will have to catch up," Christophe said. "I do not like splitting our numbers, but it must be done. We will draw the attention of the fae as we advance, which will flush out ambushes."

"Unless they slip behind with the intent to strike at the laggards," the Repentant Magister pointed out.

"You are free to retreat, if that is your wish," the Mirror Knight replied. "I expect they will not follow."

"Perhaps," Antoine hesitantly said, "Lady Eliade could seek reinforcements?"

"That would be wise," Christophe agreed, cursing himself for not having thought of such a delicate way to send her away.

Must he always give insult? It had not been meant as one even if it sounded like an accusation.

"Vagrant Spear, Adjutant, Keeper, with me," the Mirror Knight said.

"Christophe?" Antoine said, blinking in utter surprise.

"You're nearing the end of your rope," he replied. "I can't take you into the thick of it. Besides, someone needs to see to Lady Eliade's protection."

"I am still fit to fight," Antoine insisted. "I promise you-"

Anger flared.

"Don't promise me anything," Christophe forced out, "just do as I say."

The stricken look on the younger man's face had him regretting his tone immediately, but did the Blade not realize what he was doing by arguing with him in front of the others? How could they heed his orders when his own second contradicted him? The Vagrant Spear, uninterested, instead cast an uneasy look at the woman she'd been supporting for some time now.

"Nephele-" she said.

"Go," the Repentant Magister said. "I am sure the Blade of Mercy will see grandly to my safety. We will make haste and return with help."

"The Forlorn Paladin won't be far," Sidonia said. "He's an odd duck, but steady. He'll listen."

"I'm sure," the sorcerers smiled. "Shall we, Antoine?"

The Blade of Mercy cast him a look and Christophe nodded jerkily, hoping his eyes could carry the apology he could not allow himself to speak before this company.

"It would be my pleasure, Lady Eliade," the Blade of Mercy stiffly replied.

The Adjutant was watching them all, face unreadable, but the orc said nothing. Christophe did not know whether he should be disappointed or grateful for that.

"Form up," the Mirror Knight said. "We must move quickly."

They would kill the Prince of Falling Leaves, he swore it. And if none of their blades could do it...

Christophe of Pavanie would do what he must.

—

She was not surprised to find herself awaited.

Deftly, the other woman began to shuffle a deck of cards and cocked a sardonic eyebrow.

"You took your time," she said.

Slowly, careful not to aggravate her injury, she lowered herself into the seat across the table before replying.

"I had some catching up to do," Catherine Foundling replied, making herself comfortable. "But I'm about ready to begin. You?"

"Just about," the Intercessor smiled, and began to deal out the cards.

Interlude: Set Them Up

*"The Vales we held with valour
And swept clear the Wasaliti
But spring returns the enemy
As we grow old in armour."*

– Duncan Threefingers, Callowan poet

Catherine Foundling leaned back into her seat, neck yet bloody but her sharp smile unwavering. On her brow sat a crown, blackly won, and she wore a mantle made of many woes. Facing her, sprawled on her seat like a languid cat, the Wandering Bard shuffled a worn deck of cards. Trickster's fingers danced, below light blue eyes and a smile that had seen many a kingdom turn to dust. At her side waited a badly-strung lute and before her a flask of silver lay open. Both women were smiling in that way people did, when sharpening knives behind their back.

"So, what are we drinking?" Catherine asked, flicking a glance at the flask.

The Wandering Bard, whose name was now Marguerite, chuckled and set down the cards. She took a delicate glass from the side and snatched her flask, pouring a finger for the other woman.

"Ashuran *haralm*," the Bard replied, tone whimsical. "Some call it the very elixir of life."

"Nice touch," Catherine admitted. "But, as you might be aware, I have recently been stabbed."

"I may have heard of this unfortunate happenstance," the Bard said. "Do you mean to say you won't be drinking after all?"

The Black Queen snorted.

"Crows no," she said. "It means make it a double, my neck still hurts like you wouldn't believe."

"That's the spirit," the Wandering Bard grinned, and poured again.

The tanned queen picked up her glass, swirling the hard liquor within as if she were appreciating the bouquet of a fine wine instead of playing with shipborne rotgut.

"So cards, huh," Catherine said. "I wouldn't have pegged you for the type."

"I enjoy the underlying truths of the game," the Bard demurred.

"Illuminate me, by all means," the Black Queen invited, sipping at her drink.

Unlike the last time they'd shared it, she did not choke. Marguerite of Baillons deftly began shuffling the cards again, a smooth and soothing cut from hand to hand.

"Cards are unfair," the Intercessor said. "Cards about luck and lies, and sometimes there's simply no way to win."

"That usually means you're not playing the right game," the Carrion's Lord apprentice replied.

"Are you?" the Wandering Bard smiled.

Catherine drank, the liquor warming her guts.

"Hard to tell until the end," she said. "What did you have in mind?"

"How kind of you," the Bard mused, the undertone skeptical, "to let me choose this uncontested."

"Can't win if there's no game," the Black Queen grinned, all teeth and malice.

"Can't cheat without rules, is it?" the Wandering Bard smiled back, reaching for her flask. "Fair enough. Have you ever played Affray, Catherine?"

"That drunk's game?" the dark-eyed queen said, brow rising.

The Intercessor cast a look at the now quarter empty glass in her hand, then raised her flask for a silent toast.

"It's medicinal," Catherine Foundling protested, meaning *point taken*.

"Back in the day it was used as peacemaking ritual, in the lands that became Lange and Salia," the Bard confided as she shuffled. "It was your Queen of Blades that brought it east, after she went about the business of carving an empire across the Whitecaps."

It was a simple enough game, one that could be played with any tarot deck's Major Arcana. The first player would set down a card from their hand, opening an 'affray': players could set down cards one after another, with the cumulative value of the cards of any of the twenty one Major Arcana put down used to count who the winner of that affray was. To win an affray granted a player one point. The trick was that there could be up to five affrays – or more or less, depending on variants – on the table at any time, and a player could declare their loss and clear out the affray by conceding the point. For that concession they would gain the right to take back one of the cards they'd put down in said affray.

"Nowadays it's a tavern game for people too drunk for more complicated ones," Catherine snorted.

"The Langeni used clay tablets instead of cards," the Bard told her. "Each of them standing for a life sworn to the resolution of the strife."

"That's just a battle without the steel," the Black Queen said. "Nothing more or less."

The Intercessor drank of her flask and did not disagree.

"While we're having this pleasant little chat, one pal to another," Catherine said. "I've got a question to ask you."

"I delight in giving answers," the Bard replied.

"You see, I've had this song stuck in my head all day," the orphan queen said. "I don't suppose you'd know anything about that?"

"Sounds troubling," the Intercessor said, glint of triumph in her eye. "But you are in luck, as I happen to be something of an authority when it comes to songs. Which one is it that haunts you?"

The Black Queen hummed the first few bars of 'The Girl Who Climbed The Tower' and saw the way the glint died, smiling at the sight.

"Ah," Catherine Foundling said. "So there it is. Never you mind, Marguerite, I withdraw my question."

They matched eyes in silence, a moment passing.

"Seven cards each," the Wandering Bard said. "Draw on drop, five affrays."

"I await your pleasure," Catherine Foundling replied. "Hells, you can even open the game."

"Your kindness is without bounds," the Bard praised.

With light fingers she began to deal. One each, back and forth.

"Kindness?" the Black Queen said. "No. I'm just recognizing that you drew first blood, that's all there is to it."

The last card was hardly down that they both took up their hands. Each looked at their own, seeing how once more Creation had seen to the details, and with a flourish the Wandering Bard set down her first card and in the same gesture drew. What she revealed was a fair-haired woman subduing a lion, Strength. The older name for that card, and the truer one today, was Fortitude.

"The Mirror Knight," the Intercessor said. "Lost and angry and feeling it all slip away from his grasp. He'll take up the sword because it fixes all he despises about himself."

A card was set down over it, without missing a beat: a crowned and dark-skinned man on a barren throne, the Emperor.

"The Adjutant," the Black Queen said. "Faith with a cold eye, patience without hesitation. He will steer them all away from the rocks, because it is in his nature to mend what is broken."

—

The Prince of Falling Leaves had lost patience, Christophe de Pavanie saw.

Hammering at the wards hadn't borne fruit – the enchanted steel gates were still shut – so instead he had unleashed the fullness of his wrath on the stone around them. Some clever soul had seen to it this would be no solution, and even now that the cube of rock surrounded by water holding the Severance had been peeled open of protection by rot some invisible barrier still prevented the fae from entering the room. Yet the prince of the Fair Folk had grown darkly ruthless in his pursuit of entry, snatching up Arsenal armsmen and making puppets of them before throwing them across the unseen divide. The poor soldiers were slowly forcing open the enchanted doors from the inside, using their blades to pry them apart as they groaned in protest.

"Forward," the Mirror Knight bellowed, sword high.

The Vagrant Spear whooped, quickening her pace as she claimed the vanguard. The royal fae's gagged of attendants were sent out by him and swept forth against the three Named, lords and ladies carved out of frenzied dreams and wielding powers outlandish, but the Mirror Knight and the Adjutant stood like tall stones as the tide washed around them. There could be no strategy to this, no cunning: it was only a parade of sneering faces and blades that Christophe must strike at, cutting when he could and forcing

through their blows as if they were but summer rain. Yet his blade bit fae flesh too little, the Adjutant was tiring and Sidonia was still half-blind. The Vagrant Spear took the first wound, a deep slash across the face that added red to the savage paints on her face, but the orc was not far behind in having a barbed spear pierce into the side of his leg. On the sides, all the hallways leading to this godforsaken place, fae were pouring in. The wayfinders were returning, heeding the call of their lord and prince. Before long, Christophe of Pavanie knew, he would be standing alone surrounded by corpses.

Again. Too slow, too weak, too stupid, *again*.

"Cross the wards," Hakram Deadhand roared.

None knew if they would be allowed through, for the Repentant Magister was not there to speak of it – and who was it that had sent her away? Christophe of Pavanie, once more the gravedigger of finer souls – but what choice did they have? The Adjutant was the first to reach where once stone had stood, before it frittered away into pebbles and dust, and after resisting for a heartbeat the wards let him through. Without hesitation the orc limped towards the enchanted soldiers, axe raised. Sidonia was halfway to safety, when some wild-looking fae ran her through the side with a slender rapier of bone. Christophe swelled with anger, screaming, and tore his way through the Fair Folk to get to her side. The fae parted like mist wherever he struck, and though their strikes glanced off his sides and shield with barely any effort the Mirror Knight had never felt more *impotent* than in that moment.

Sidonia had rammed a knife through the hollow of the fae's chin, by the time he got there, even as the warrior twisted his grip and ran through her lung. The Mirror Knight smashed down the *animal* with his shield, fury boiling out, and dropped his blade to pick up the Vagrant Spear even as the fae swarmed him like flies. Step by step, keeping Sidonia safe under the shield, he retreated to the safety of the wards as the Fair Folk harassed him. It was onto wet stone he stood, a wounded friend clutched tight in his arms, and Gods forgive him but *he had sent away their only healer*. He would have wept of it, but what would weeping do? Sidonia could still make it through this, if the fae were scattered and help sought. But could he abandon the Severance for the sake of one soul, to its likely destruction?

No, he thought as he laid her down, he could not.

To the side, the Adjutant slew the third struggling soldier with a clean stroke through the neck but it had been a moment too late. The doors had been open, just a finger's worth, and the crack the steel gave as it did had the ring of the inexorable to it.

—

"I didn't think you'd send the Deadhand out with that valiant lot right from the start," the Bard acknowledged. "You usually keep him in reserve for longer."

"He was the only one who could do it," Catherine shrugged. "Can you imagine if I'd sent Archer with them instead?"

The Intercessor chuckled.

"That would have been my affray before long, true enough," she said. "He's a steady sort, your man, I won't argue that. But he can't spin gold from straw, Catherine. The Mirror Knight has been left to fester for too long, the sickness sunk into the bones."

"I'll not speak to Christophe of Pavanie," the Black Queen said. "He's not one of mine, and I know him little. But I have put my faith in Hakram Deadhand many a time, when the day grew dark, and I was never once disappointed."

"Your father's daughter indeed," the Wandering Bard said, and it was a compliment to neither. "I told him then and I'll tell you now: love always fucks you over."

"If you want the right to lecture me," Catherine Foundling replied, unmoved, "*win*."

As if prompted by the words, the Bard set down her second card. A black spire of stone piercing even the clouds, as pale lightning struck at it: the Tower.

"Ruin onto your Truce and Terms," the Intercessor said. "The Red Axe slain in blind revenge, heroes and villains at each other's throats beyond what can be mended."

The other woman gave answer without batting an eye, her card dropped atop the other with insolent nonchalance. It showed a fair prince, riding a chariot pulled by horses both black and white: the Chariot.

"The Kingfisher Prince," the Black Queen said. "Alamans iron forged in a Lycaonese forge, daring with duty holding the reins. Authority and trust, crowns earthly and not."

Under her breath, barely noticing it, she hummed the tune to a familiar song that spoke of foxes and kings.

—

"It appears we've run into a spot of trouble, my friend," Prince Frederic of Brus jovially said.

Soldiers crowded both ends of the hallway, perhaps sixty in whole? Not a small amount, considering the garrison of the Arsenal should not surpass three hundred in whole. By the looks of them it was a mix of bearded Levantines and the latest issue of the mold buried at the heart of Callow that kept churning out gruff, middle-aged soldiers with hard eyes. No Named or creatures, by the looks of it, but Frederic's eyes were not so fine he would trust them without condition.

"Let me go," the Red Axe grunted. "I'll make it out on my own."

Doubtful, considering she was currently bereft of the weapon that'd earned her the Choosing, but admittedly it sometimes paid to keep your coin on Chosen when the odds were long. Regardless it was simply out of question that he might let an unarmed, shoeless and manacled woman be captured by a band of soldiers. The sheer dishonour of such a thing would force him to abdicate, shorn his hair in contrition and never again enjoy a vintage more than a year old.

The Prince of Brus might even have to drink wine from Callow in penance, which was simply too horrid a fate to contemplate.

"No need for that," Frederic assured her. "I do happen to have a smattering of royal blood in my veins, which comes in useful on occasion. I should be able to talk our way out of this."

From the corner of his eye, he caught the sight of an approaching half-company of crossbowmen. It seemed to have been what the surrounding soldiers were waiting for, as a moment later a captain in Dominion armour and paint hailed them.

"You are surrounded and were caught red-handed helping a prisoner escape," the Dominion warrior said. "Surrender now or be served the sword."

Whoever it was who'd arranged this, Frederic thought, had been careful. There was not a single Proceran soldier here, someone who might have trusted or deferred to a prince of the blood – on the contrary, trying such a thing with this lot was a lot more likely to have them using those crossbows. The Callowans in particular still remembered being at war with the Principate and were a famously touchy lot when it came to foreigners. Not without reason, but in the current circumstances that was rather unfortunate.

At least it smoothed away any notion he might have developed of this being a betrayal by the Black Queen. Cordelia had told him once that Queen Catherine had a fondness for soldiers and the common folk, sometimes at the expense of those of higher births, which given the First Prince's diplomatic tendencies likely meant that the Black Queen would bake an entire pie out of dukes to feed an urchin child from the street without batting an eye. She

was not the kind of woman who would sacrifice her own countrymen, her own soldiers, to carry out so petty a scheme.

Like as not, Frederic mused, this was part of the trap. A Proceran prince, the sole Chosen among them, slaughtering Callowan soldiers to help a killer escape justice – even if Queen Catherine came out in his support, which would be... delicate, the mere appearances of this would have the Army of Callow brought to a boil. Someone, Frederic Goethal thought, was trying to sow dissension within the Grand Alliance at a time where unity was one of the few things standing between them and annihilation.

Someone was going to have to *die*, evidently.

"I understand that you have a duty," the Kingfisher Prince called out. "Yet so do I, and I have reason to believe that this woman's life is in danger. That is why I sprung her from her cell."

"I don't care if you've got duty or if you've got the clap, princeling," the Dominion captain said. "Drop your sword and kneel, *now*."

"I will do this, on my honour," the Prince of Brus replied, "if you can assure me that I will be placed in the same cell as the Red Axe, and that my sword will be returned to me when I am in that cell."

It was possible that Frederic would be able to fight his way through this, though far from certain – Dominion foot was hardy and sharpened by years of raiding, while the Callowans were veterans from half a dozen ludicrously brutal wars – but it would be a slaughter. Against such numbers, it would be vanity to attempt anything but his utmost. That meant killing blows, and the full might of his Choosing behind him.

"I must not have been clear," the Dominion captain shouted, "this isn't a negotiation, princeling. But it's your last warning, though, so drop that *fucking* sword."

If it came to a fight, Frederic Goethal thought, in a very real sense he had already lost. What did he have he could bargain with, here? Should he simply surrender, and from a visible and reassuring position of weakness try to make his case then?

"You shouldn't have come," the Red Axe whispered. "It'll make it all worse. Just step back and act strange, I'll say I used my Bestowal to make you do it."

"I do not believe I could ever come to enjoy Dormer reds," Frederic confessed, "so I shall have to decline."

"Hold," another voice called out. "What's this all about, then?"

It was a Callowan lieutenant who'd spoken out, a stout orc with a scarred face and a wary look about him.

"Stay out of this, Inger," the Dominion captain said. "You are outranked."

Ah, how embarrassing – about her, the prince silently corrected.

"Outrank my ass, Hassar," the orc growled. "I'm not shooting a fucking war hero without at least asking *why* first."

That, the Kingfisher Prince decided, sounded like a way to turn this around.

—

"Agnes continues to hold a grudge, I see," the Wandering Bard said. "She really ought to know better than to meddle by now. It never helps."

"It's a tired old game, this one," Catherine Foundling said. "This pretence that you *know better*, that you are the natural mistress of all our fates and we do offence by pulling our own strings. I'd oppose you for that alone, even if you were all you try to pass for."

"You oppose me because there is no part of you that can tolerate being used instead of user," the Intercessor replied. "Everything else you add atop of that is a justification attempting to be just."

"Have you ever been beaten twice in the same century before?" the Black Queen mused. "Gods, twice in the same *decade*? The Tyrant of the Augur, and maybe now a third headed your way. It has to sting, that your grip is growing loose after all these years."

The Intercessor laughed.

"How very badly you want me to be your enemy," she said, as if awed. "To be *malicious*, out to get you. As if I was not simply snuffing out fires before they swallowed too much, no small number lit by your hand."

"You feed on agency, Intercessor," the Black Queen said, tone cold. "You are a parasite sucking the blood out of all you touch. Whatever you might once have been, that is what you are now: mad as any Tyrant, callously make use of all the world to fight your war on Keter."

"Yours is a rout, Catherine," the Intercessor said. "I watched, for two years. I waited. And what do you have to show for it? You teased out a few of his tricks and buried a kingdom's worth of dead as the price. You are out of your league. You are *failing*."

"You lie as easily as you breathe," the Black Queen replied. "These plans have been years in the making, you did not wait a whit. You simply cannot tolerate that this war can be fought in any way but with your hand at the helm."

"Where are the devils, Catherine?" the Intercessor said. "Where are the hosts that darken the skies, and the demons he has kept leashed for centuries? Where are the rituals that poison the land and the sorceries never before seen? I'll tell you the truth of it."

She leaned forward, eyes hooded.

"Your alliance is not great enough a threat to warrant the use of any of those," the Intercessor said. "*You do not worry him.*"

"You must know, deep down, that the truth of you is unpalatable to any who grasp it," the Black Queen said, hard-eyed. "Why else would you remain half-hidden, pulling strings instead of serving as an advisor to the greats of this age? You talk about the Dead King, again and again, as if the horror of him in any way excuses what *you* are."

"As is your habit, you talk of-"

"*Gods, have I had enough of that,*" the orphan girl snarled. "This insistence that we don't understand while you don't explain, that we are ignorant when you do not teach, that we are blind when you keep us in the dark. You are not somehow beyond us, you leech. You're not too important, too big to be judged – not when you spend our lives like coppers. Being old and hard to kill does no exempt you from consequence, and even if it's the last thing I do I will carve the truth of that into your fucking skull."

"How many times I've been in this seat, the subject of that same indignation spoken through a different tongue," the Intercessor said. "And do you know how it comes to happen, that I am lectured again?"

She smiled mirthlessly.

"Because I do what is necessary anyway," the Wandering Bard said.

"You might be fighting a monster," the Black Queen said, "but what of it? The rest of us are, after all, fighting *two*."

The other woman softly laughed.

"A leech and a scavenger," the Wandering Bard mused. "My, but what a pair we make. So, my friend, from one bottom-feeder to another – shall we settle the order of precedence among the base and hungry?"

A card was put down on the table, smoothly but without gentleness. Grey-clad and tanned, bearing a lantern and a staff: the Hermit.

"Fear and treason, conspiracy," the Intercessor said. "Your fishing rod of crowns untouched but the fisherman drowned by the tide anyway. The Hierophant, *slain*."

It was carefully, almost delicately, that a card was placed over the last. Two figures crowned with roses and holding hands, a radiant sun above them: the Lovers.

"Archer," Catherine Foundling said, her voice clear as a frozen pond, fury gone cold. "Love like greed and feet unrelenting – Gods have mercy on whoever you sent after him, because she *will make them into meat*."

—

It had taken Indrani longer to figure that she needed to go after Masego than to figure out where he actually would be.

Cat had been no help at all, disappearing from the corpse the moment she heard what there'd been to say, but eventually Archer had pieced it all together. She'd gone to the Belfry because she figured Catherine would be there, and she'd been right, but that'd been true for a reason: Cat had come here to keep Autumn's grubby little hands off of the stuff in Masego's quarters. This debt business the fae talked about, it was about breaking the most promising stuff in the Arsenal – the Bard, for some no doubt godawful reason, must have wanted it gone. Except the fae that'd gone for Quartered Seasons had gotten slaughtered wholesale, and presumably two traitors had died in the failure as well: the Poet and the Monk, both gone. It seemed like a right mess for the Bard's side, but who the fuck ever knew with that one? She was all twists and turns and nipping at her own tail.

The bottom line of it, though, was that it'd been a pretty shit plan to send a bunch of fae after what was probably one of the single most warded rooms in the entire Arsenal. Indrani figured that even if the Artificer hadn't bottled up the fairies near the bottom of the Belfry they would have been stuck hammering at that door for at least an hour, if not more. Fae were infamously shit at dealing with thresholds, and while Olowe's Theorem suggested that a bastard realm like the Arsenal would only have weaker versions of creational laws like those weak didn't mean *absent*. For a supposed weaver of wiles like the Wandering Bard, it was a lackluster effort. It'd tied up a lot of Named, though. And when Indrani had considered Quartered Seasons with a cold eye, thinking about how she would have scuppered that ship, the answer had been pretty obvious: Hierophant.

The material stuff could be built up again, but if Masego was dead that project was dead in the water. It was his theories, his rituals, his methods from beginning to start. Even if his notes got passed to someone else, it was doubtful they'd be able to keep going. There just weren't that many mages with that kind of talent in Calernia. So, that must have been the play then: striking loud at the front gate, then slipping through the back to slide the knife. Zeze wasn't helpless, but he wasn't exactly invincible either. More worryingly he had some pretty dangerous weaknesses, for someone who knew where to look.

After that it'd just been a matter of figuring out where he was, since he obviously wasn't in his rooms. Archer had almost smacked herself in the back of the head when she'd realized she was making this a lot more complicated than it needed to be: the outer wards of the Arsenal had been broken through by Autumn, and Hierophant had been one of the mages to set those foundations down. He wouldn't be holed up or spoiling for a fight right now, he'd be fixing those wards and making sure that the entire Arsenal didn't start splitting in pieces between multiple layers of the Pattern. Which, uh, would be... unpleasant to anyone happening to be in one of those pieces when they split. Archer didn't need four Named to watch Masego's back, though, and there'd be other fires to put out. So she sent Roland and Cocky where she figured they'd be most useful, and went on with only the Blessed Artificer at her side.

Adanna of Smyrna was exhausted, grumpy and running out of Light baubles to use but she had done one very important thing to contribute: she was one of the few keyed into the wards that surrounded the Chancel, the part of the Arsenal where the central warding array was.

They cut in through the Alcazar's tunnels, since they were deserted and a shortcut, and got through the first checkpoint smoothly enough. It'd been stripped of guards, which boded ill but might well have a mundane explanation given that the Arsenal was currently under attack. The two of them passed by the restricted stacks, Indrani feeling the hum of those heavy wards against her skin, and then the large room called the Mirage. Yet before they arrived at the bottom of the stairs leading to the second of three checkpoints protecting the central array, Archer caught a familiar scent in the air. Blood. Somewhere close to here someone had spilled blood, and recently. She raised a hand, signaling for the Blessed Artificer to halt. The other woman did, after a beat.

"We're not alone," Archer murmured. "Assume an enemy, blood was spilled."

"Do you think the Hierophant is wounded?" the Blessed Artificer whispered back.

"There'd be a lot more holes in the everything, if someone stuck him," Indrani decided. "But it might be where the guards are gone."

She gestured for the Blessed Artificer to follow her, quiet as she could, and they withdrew some. The smell had been coming from the near the Arsenal treasury offices, Indrani figured, so it was worth a look.

Archer caught the reflection of magelights on steel just before the blade slid between her ribs.

—

Catherine Foundling drained her glass dry and leaned forward. Hands hidden beneath a cloak laden with many victories, eyes cold, she cracked her neck the saw way she had back when she'd still fought for silvers in the Pit.

"I'd say it's about time to get started in earnest, isn't it?" the Black Queen said, smiling the smile of a woman who'd ransacked a shatranj board before coming there.

Hands carelessly plucking at the strings of the badly-strung lute on her lap the Wandering Bard hummed, fingers too deft for the clumsy sounds they brought and eyes looking at places that were not in this room.

"I couldn't agree more," the Intercessor said, smiling the smile of someone whose sleeves were filled with half a dozen decks of cards.

Interlude: Knock Them Down

*"The henhouse stands unlatched
All within, by the fox snatched
So here they go, once again
Chasing a red tail into the glen*

*But we know, oh we know,
That in the woods, the fox is king
Yes we know, oh we know
That in the woods, the fox is king*

*Run the hounds, rides the hunter
His spear in hand, banner aflutter
Charging that way, this one baying
Trampling the paths, again raging*

*But we know, oh we know,
That in the woods, the fox is king
Yes we know, oh we know*

That in the woods, the fox is king

*Over the hills, across the glade
Where the sun rests in the shade
He hides and waits, until the day
When the hunts are chased away*

*For we know, oh we know
That in the woods, the fox is king
Yes we know, oh we know
That in the woods, the fox is king."*

-*"The Fox in the Woods"*, a Callowan rebel song from the latter years of the Proceran occupation

The Wandering Bard set down her card with telltale nonchalance, to the side of the three affrays that had already been opened. Though there had once been many appearances for this one for hundreds years now one had come to dominate all the others: a dark and faceless woman, holding a red banner, and at her feet letters were written large – TRIUMPH. The Empress. The Bard withdrew her hand and smiled, gesturing for her opponent to act in turn.

"Silence?" the Black Queen said. "That's a new one for you."

"I have not a single new game," the Intercessor smiled. "Only a legion of old ones, given fresh faces."

"Stingy," the orphan queen complained. "You haven't revealed who it is that's the little helper you've still got running around the place, either."

The Miscellaneous Stacks had burned, but before that those who dwelled within had been forced to slumber by a gaseous poison. The hand that'd opened those bottles had yet to be revealed.

"You still go about this as if you were a general, Catherine," the Bard said. "Seeing battles and sending soldiers out to fight them until some nebulous war can be won."

"Doing it all wrong, am I?" the Black Queen mused. "By all means, Marguerite, educate me."

"Your teacher, in truth, is a finer hand at this than any might suspect," the Wandering Bard said. "So I shall borrow his words, spoken once to another: it is all objects in motion, Catherine. If you can see the trajectories of the spheres in the void, all that is required from you is the first nudge."

"Been talking to him?" the woman who had once been a girl said.

Even as the words left her lips, she grew vexed. The airiness she had affected as she spoke had been too sweet on the tongue for either of them to swallow it.

"He has no use for the likes of me, that enterprising blackguard," the Intercessor said. "But he seems to be having a great deal of fun out there, having every part the Wasteland hacking at the other as they try to catch his shadow."

"How pleasant for him," the tired general replied.

"But look at me, jabbering on about things so very far way," the Bard said, salting the wound. "It is your turn to lead the dance, Catherine."

"I'm just biding my time," the Black Queen shrugged.

"Archer is bleeding," the Wandering Bard told her. "Adjutant is spent."

"When you came up," the woman who had once been a girl said, eyes sharp, "it was alone, wasn't it? You weren't part of a band."

"Stories were not as... forgiving, back then," the Intercessor said, half a concession. "But I have been part of many bands, Catherine."

"No," the Black Queen quietly said, "you haven't. Not in the way that really matters."

"Do you think I've never loved?" the Intercessor disdainfully said. "That I've never craved, never lost? I am more human than anyone ever has been, or ever will be. All that is it to be that, I have been a thousand times over."

She leaned forward, a flush to her cheek that had nothing to do with drink.

"When I tell you that loves fucks always fucks you over, I do not speak in contempt or in ignorance," the Intercessor said. "I speak, Catherine Foundling, from *pity*."

The Black Queen, her hand certain and her fingers deft, placed a single black pawn on the table from the shatranj she had stripped bare.

"One," the Queen of Lost and Found stated.

Her mind thrummed with an old song, the beat of it eerily resonant.

"You still believe they can't be touched just because you love them," the Wandering Bard said, almost disbelieving. "You cannot be that naïve. That is not trust, it is fantasy."

"It's fine line, between that and faith," Catherine Foundling said.

"The game goes on, whether you play it or not," Marguerite said, eyes moving to the wooden pawn painted black with something like wariness. "Whatever else you might be playing."

She slid a card above the Chariot, obscuring it. A man holding a broken scepter, at his side a golden cup filled to the brim: the Magician.

"Why now," the Black Queen murmured, "that's almost an admission, isn't it?"

"I will not hold your hand through all of this," the Bard chided.

"That's fine," Catherine said. "I've got better uses for mine."

A card was gently placed atop the last one, elaborate in appearance. A crowned man on a throne, seven nooses and one around his head and a sword in his right hand: Justice.

—

During his time observing that most of the foreign soldiery seemed to dislike his countrymen, not entirely without reason, Prince Frederic of Brus now realized he might have underestimated the extent to which they also disliked *each other*.

"I gave you an order, Inger," the Levantine captain – Hassar – shouted at the orc. "Get back in the damned ranks."

"You don't give me fucking orders, Dominion," Inger the orc snarled. "Don't you have sheep to go raiding your cousins for? Let the professionals handle this."

"Slight my honour again and we'll settle this steel in hand," Captain Hassar harshly said.

"I'd like to see you try," the orc said, to the cheers of her fellows. "Clear that scabbard and we'll give you another Sarcella."

"You ran from us across half of Procer before the Black Queen stepped in to save your hides," Captain Hassar mocked, to the cheers of the Levantines. "Try to give us a Sarcella without her, *orc*, see how that ends for you."

"I'll tell you how: with a lot less mercy, *feet-dragger*," the orc lieutenant jeered.

The Callowan legionaries banged their shields, the Dominion warriors shouted in anger and Frederic decided now was not the time to remind these fine people that Sarcella had been a

Proceran city stuck in the middle of their fighting without much of a choice in the matter. Not unlike him, truth be told.

"If I might claim your attention once more," Frederic said, tone cheerful. "I would be much obliged if no blood was spilled tonight, my friends. We are, if I might remind you, yet under attack by common foes."

"Then throw down your sword, prince," Captain Hassar said. "You were caught red-handed, no talking will get you out of that."

"I was charged with the protection of the Red Axe from assassination by the current ranking authority in the Arsenal, Queen Catherine of Callow," the fair-haired prince said. "I understand you may doubt my word, but I do not require great concession – only that you allow me to see to her safety by sharing her confinement."

It was not ideal, but at least he seemed to have flushed out part of the Bird of Misfortune's schemes. And should his terms of surrender be accepted, he could use the walk to the holding cells as an opportunity to find out – perhaps from Lieutenant Inger, who seemed friendly enough in that orc way – who it was that'd sent all these soldiers after him. Learning that Name would likely unmask an agent of their great foe within. Yet Frederic's words were not met with understanding or consideration, but instead a great deal of anger from both the Callowans and the Levantines.

"You'll be dead before you take the first swing," Captain Hassar said. "CROSSBOWS, at the ready."

The lieutenant did not gainsay the Dominion officer, to Frederic's surprise, and the soldiers called at obeyed without qualms. Something was wrong here. Had his words been misheard? Suspecting the worse, he unsheathed his sword and set it down on the floor. There was no reaction from the soldiers.

"This is your *last* warning," the painted captain snarled. "One more step and-"

An illusion, Frederic grasped. Someone had laid an illusion on the soldiers and through the lie was misleading them to attack. The enemy was already here.

"My lady of Red," the Kingfisher Prince said, "might I trouble you to chase away the enchantment bedevilling these soldiers?"

"I can't," the Red Axe said, tone tormented. "It only protects me, not others."

Reluctantly, Frederic began to consider reaching for the sword he'd placed down. He would try to abstain from killing as much as

possible and cease the moment it appeared the illusion might be faltering, but he would not fail in the charge that had been given onto him. The Red Axe would be good as dead if surrounded by soldiers under an enemy's spells, unarmed and still shackled. If the political consequences of this were focused onto him instead of the Principate, Frederic Goethal thought, and he was 'made' to abdicate by the First Prince, the Grand Alliance might yet survive the blow without sundering. Henriette would rule well in his stead, it would do no disservice to the people of Brus to crown her princess in his stead.

Breathing out, the Kingfisher Prince crouched to take back his sword.

"Stop," a woman screamed. "Stops this *right now*."

The soldiers stirred, turning to watch the two unexpected arrivals behind the Dominion swords: a woman of the Free Cities, visibly bloodied from hard fighting, and a young man that Frederic was more familiar with. The Blade of Mercy, Antoine of Lange. One of the two countrymen Cordelia had asked him to take in hand when she suggested she came to the Arsenal. The young man's greatsword was recognizable enough, and by the reaction of the soldiers the woman Free Cities was even better known.

"Lady Eliade," Captain Hassar said, "with all due respect-"

"With all due respect, captain, you are currently under an illusion," the Repentant Magister said. "If you would simply allow me to dispel it, the truth of this will be revealed."

Frederic Goethal was not above accepting salvation, particularly when it was so gallantly offered. He was not above the occasional theatrics, either, and so he rose to his full height and left his sword on the ground. It would make a more striking image that way. A moment later the painted captain grudgingly gave his assent, and the Repentant Magister raised her hand.

Sorcery bloomed, and there was a sound like a mirror shattering.

—

"Tricky, tricky," the Wandering Bard said, eyes faraway. "How did you know it would clever little Nephele that stumbled into this mess?"

"Objects in motion, wasn't it?" the Black Queen replied, lips quirking savagely. "She's got maybe half the power to throw around that Hierophant had at his speak, and she uses it mostly on tricks and defensive spells – and she's in a band, which means she'll be using any spell she puts out six times whenever she uses it. A running battle against fae, of higher mettle than the

one I tangled with? It was a given she'd be the first to grow exhausted."

"That is hardly a guarantee she would end up *there*," the Bard leadingly said, glancing at the other affrays.

"Archer's was always going to be a fight, and she just left the other mess," the Black Queen said. "Providence good as ensured she was going to end up where she could actually save the day. I can't ride that horse, most the time, but a heroine like her sure as Hells can."

"Those do not sound like the words of a villain," the Intercessor smiled.

"The world's changing, Bard," the Black Queen said. "Whether you like it or not."

"Such a brash one, you are," the Wandering Bard chuckled.

She shrugged, cards peeking out the edge of her sleeve.

"But not without skill, I suppose," she continued, then rapped a knuckle atop Justice. "I concede the affray."

Trickster's fingers went looking for a card she had set down – the Tower, the other glimpsed before the card was made to disappear with a flourish of the wrist – and she gallantly gestured for the opposition to proceed.

"One point to me," Catherine said, eyes narrowing as she cleared out the rest of the pile.

Warily, she set her card down as the first of another affray. It depicted wings of bronze holding aloft a faceless entity wielding a pale sword, at its feet kneeling a humbled prince, priest and merchant: Judgement.

"Well now," the Wandering Bard grinned. "What might *that* be about?"

"Silence for silence," the Black Queen retorted. "It will matter when it matters."

"How exciting," the Intercessor praised. "But I suppose it is up to me to get this game back on the right path, isn't it?"

The card she laid down over the Lovers was austere to the eye. A priestess in penitent's robes, pouring water from one cup into the wine of another: Temperance.

"It's not that she means to be a traitor, our dear Artificer," the Bard said. "It's simply that given what she is and where she

is, she might as well be – she who tinkers with Light knows neither doubt nor restraint.”

—

Indrani swung around, blinding striking at whoever it was that'd knifed her – and had suspicions, foolish as they might be – and the blade slid out as the attempted assassin withdrew before she could hit anything. She clenched her teeth from the pain, but at least she was fairly sure it'd not punctured the lung. That would have been a bloody and embarrassing way to die.

“Archer,” the Blessed Artificer called out in fear and anger, “DUCK.”

With a curse Indrani did, the sound of a twig snapping being followed by a strike of sizzling Light above her. The lack of even a grunt of pain was the only warning she got, and she didn't act quite quickly enough. Even as she began moving, the bolt of Light curved down and struck her back. Screaming as she coat gave, feeling aftershocks of Light going through her body even as the space between her shoulders was turned into a burned and bloody mess, Archer was smashed into the floor.

“Adanna, don't-” Indrani croaked out, but Light bloomed again.

A collar of the burning glare formed around the neck of the man looming standing behind her – and by the size of him, Archer's outlandish thought had come true – but a moment later it the Light was instead nailing Indrani's arm to the stone floor, having formed into a spike and burned through flesh and muscle just above her elbow. *Fuck*. She wouldn't be able to shoot like that or use both of her blades. The Fallen Monk eyed her for a moment, a serenely calm face over a bulging belly, but only bothered to kick her in the face before he flickered out of sight again. How was the man still alive, after getting Catherine to make darkglass out of a stone floor? Indrani had seen him fail to manipulate the works of Below before, she shouldn't have cut it against Night. Light bloomed again, as the Monk reappeared close to the Artificer and the green heroines panicked.

“Fuck,” Archer cursed again, rolling to the side as the defensive net of Light that'd popped up was turn into a rain of deadly shard headed for her.

A few caught the edge of her wounded arm, but her mail turned what would have been a hard turn into mild burns. She ripped her coat rising to her feet, though, as one of the shards had nailed the edge of it down.

“Stop using Light, you fool,” Archer shouted, unsheathing one of her blades.

Just in time to see the Fallen Monk slug the Artificer in the stomach, her hasty attempt at a guard blown through. Indrani grit her teeth and aimed before she could think, her longknife spinning as it sailed through the air. But the Monk slid behind the heroine, Indrani's throw missing him by inches, and he nudged up the Blessed Artificer's chin with his bloody knife. Archer already had her other blade in hand, but no opening to use it: frozen in fear, Adanna of Smyrna had gone still.

"Drop the blade," the Fallen Monk said. "Or I slit her throat."

"Shit, you got me," Archer lied, and without hesitation advanced.

The Monk withdrew his hand from Adanna's apron, producing a twig and snapping with his free hand. Light erupted and curved out in two staggered arcs towards Archer. She'd seen it coming this time, though, and it was not good enough a trick to take her by surprise. She quickened her step to pass the first arc, darted back to let the second pass before her and in the beat that followed she'd closed the distance entirely. Still reaching for another bauble inside the Artificer's stash, the Monk was surprised when she got hold of herself and elbowed him in the guts. His fat meant it barely stung, but the surprise bought Archer a moment – she carved at the man's wrist, and though he darted away with viperous quickness he had to leave Adanna behind.

Indrani had blood on her blade, now, and she fully intended to get more. Did the Monk think he'd been the only one to study the weaknesses of the Named in her band?

"Listen close, Artificer," Indrani said. "I have a plan to kill the bastard."

—

"So how's that one working out for you?" the leader of the Woe smilingly asked.

The Wandering Bard sighed, which was answer enough.

"All of Ranger's pupils are absurdly hard to kill," she complained. "She stayed out of that sort of thing until recently, you know, it's your bloody teacher who gave her the taste for it. Among other things."

The leer there was painted on, put there to irritate, but like most barbs of that hand it struck true.

"One can't account for taste, I suppose," Catherine said, wrinkling her nose.

"Gotta agree with you there," Marguerite said. "She's a looker, mind you, but everything else?"

"Funny," the Black Queen mused, "since I consider the two of you to have quite a lot in common."

"Harsh," the Wandering Bard replied, appreciative.

The other woman offered a shallow smile, amusement so thin a finger run across it would reveal dislike.

"I've been wondering," Catherine Foundling said. "Now that you're Alamans-"

"This is going to get uncivil, isn't it?" the Bard sighed.

"- does that fill with wine more often, or does it stay the same swill?" Catherine Foundling finished, gesturing at the silver flask.

The Intercessor considered the other woman, for a moment.

"The limp," she replied, "does it come and go the way you want it to?"

The other woman did not answer. Instead she reached within her mantle and pulled out a second painted black pawn. She set it down next to the first, the ring it gave as it hit the wood echoed of the word *mistake*.

"Two," the Queen of Lost and Found stated.

"Feigning a deeper game will not get you out of this," the Wandering Bard said.

The Callowan queen hummed under her breath, knowing that now the ugliness was to come, and the Intercessor eyed the pawns with cold eyes.

"We are not yet done," the Bard said, and set down a card.

It fell over the Severance's affray, over the Emperor, and obscured the card beneath it. It depicted a tall and well-formed person, with chains around their neck going to the border of the card. Two details gave away the truth: claws at the end of fingers and red eyes. The Devil.

"Violence," the Wandering Bard said. "Violence bringing about the inexorable."

—

Adjutant's jaw tightened as he grasped that he had been just a little too late.

The soldiers the fae had enchanted had forced open the doors of the room using their blades and that was the beginning of the end. The steel doors had only been pried open a crack, but it would be enough: already his attempts to draw them shut were failing, the implacable strength of a great noble of the fae pulling against him. Now that the enemy had a way to cross the wards it came down to strength, and their strength had waned. The Vagrant Spear had been bloodied and could barely stand, much less fight, while the Mirror Knight had lost his blade saving the heroine and now had a look in his eyes – like a horse that'd smelled blood, fear and fervour all mixed up together. Hakram pulled at the doors again, but against the massive strength on the other side he failed: they pulled further open.

Snatching up the axe and shield he'd thrown to the side to struggle, he retreated just before a cloud of rot and decay hissed through the opening.

The fae began to hammer at the steel, shaking the doors and forcing them open inch by inch. Behind Adjutant, the Mirror Knight had retreated across the holy water through a path that'd risen up and was now carrying Sidonia into the stone cube where the sword was kept. Hakram followed, forcing down the throbbing pain in his leg where a spear had torn flesh, and was nearly across when the doors broke and the tide of fae poured in. A spear flew at him, and the orc's fangs clicked together in dismay – he would not be fast enough. Yet a hand jutted out from behind the wards of the cube, grabbing him by the arm and forcefully dragging him to safety. The Mirror Knight released him as the spear shattered on the wards, the way they shivered a warning that they would not hold forever.

"Thank you," Hakram said, and meant it.

The spear would not have killed him, but such a wound might well have been permanent. Some things neither sorcery nor Light could heal.

"Think nothing of it," the Mirror Knight said, eyes on the roiling fae outside.

The Prince of Falling Leaves was gathering them into an array of war, readying to batter at the wards keeping them from their prize. The Severance, sleeping in the pool of water in the back of the room. The surface of the water ever shivered, as if some wind that did not exist was caressing it. Both of them found their steps drifting closer to it.

"We will have to wait for reinforcements," Adjutant admitted. "We cannot fight them off alone."

"If we do," the Mirror Knight quietly said, "Sidonia will die."

"I can speak for myself," the Vagrant Spear wetly coughed, from where she lay propped up against the wall. "It will be an honourable death, Christophe. One worthy of being added to the rolls. Hold until the others come."

"Will they come?" the Mirror Knight softly asked. "Who is it that would relieve us, Sidonia?"

He shook his head, eyes hardening, and he took the last step up to the edge of the pond.

"No," the Proceran said. "We stand alone."

That growing iron in the man's eyes was a dangerous thing, the orc thought. It must be averted before it grew tempered, for it reeked of desperate decisions. How? His eyes found Sidonia, her breathing broken by a wet cough. A punctured lung, the orc judged. Yet even wounded and prone, she remained the key to salvaging this.

"Archer will be coming," the Adjutant said. "The other war party was a lesser one, it will have been wiped out by now. She must be headed our way already."

"See?" Sidonia rasped. "The Lady will see to it. She might even be dragging the Physician along by the ear."

The second part had been tacked on with more effort than skill, but for all that the Mirror Knight hesitated. Adjutant breathed out. If it came to a fight, the hero would win. That much was set in stone. But it would not come to that, and he could still prevent some foolish decision from –

–

The Black Queen paled, knuckles turning white from the strength of her grip. She rapped them against the last card placed down, the Devil.

"I concede the affray," Catherine said.

Without waiting for an answer she leaned forward and her fingers grasped the edge of the Emperor, trying to extract him from the pile.

"That's not how it goes," the Intercessor gently said. "You're playing the game, right now, but you're not playing the *Game*."

The old thing with a young face offered a half-hearted smile.

"He's not going to leave, Catherine," she said. "That's not the kind of man you made him into."

She shrugged.

"Take the card, if you want," the Intercessor said. "It doesn't mean anything. But as a last piece of advice-"

Even as the Black Queen, lips thinned, began to remove her card the Wandering Bard set down one of her own. Catherine's hand ceased, as she tried to look at the fresh card and found she could not.

"It's a damned scary trick," the Bard said. "For a damned scary woman. Think back, Catherine – how many cards are there, in the Major Arcana?"

Twenty-one, the Black Queen almost said, but she held her tongue. Now that her eyed had been drawn to the oddness she could feel out the shape of it, if not fill the void. It was as if what had lain there was now absent.

"The Moon," the Wandering Bard said. "The Maddened Keeper: the seal on darkness, who partakes of its powers. You did not remember her, or her card, because Creation finds her to be absent."

"Demon," the Black Queen said. "I remember her being added to the rolls, some months ago, but nothing more recent."

Her fingers clenched.

"How many does she hold, Bard?" Catherine Foundling asked.

"Seven and one," the Wandering Bard said.

Fingers clenched even tighter.

"I warned you," the Intercessor said. "Love always fucks you. You can't be... this and love them all the while, Catherine. It will hollow you out from the inside."

Catherine Foundling took the card, her mouth tasting of ashes.

—

"-might even be dragging the Physician along by the ear," Sidonia assured him.

Even she did not sound entirely like she believed it, but Christophe could see the sense in what she and the Adjutant had said. He could not find it in himself to wait long, but to not even attempt to put his faith in his comrades would be almost as grievous as sin. The fae hammered at the wards, the cube shaking around them, but these were not the works of middling wizards. They would hold for some time yet.

"We should prepare for the assault of the fae," the Mirror Knight said. "There is only one entrance, so-"

Before he could finish speaking, as if to mock him, a creature appeared. A strange woman, with long unkempt hair and a sickly mien. She was standing behind the Adjutant, and without a word she reached out towards the orc.

"Adjutant," Christophe screamed, and he would have done more but *he had no sword*, "behind-"

The woman's hands touched the orc's side and his flesh boiled, from the arm all down to his foot, as the reek of demonic corruption spread through the room. The Mirror Knight's hand plunged into the waters, seizing the sheathed blade within even as some eldritch force tore at his armour until only the bare skin of his hand was left – itself stronger than steel, from all the dawns it had seen. Sidonia threw her spear, and the enemy moved back even as the Adjutant dropped with a blood-curling scream, but the Vagrant Spear's aim had suffered from the wounding.

Christophe's did not.

The Severance came clear of the scabbard with a faint scream, as if it were cutting the very air, and in three steps the Mirror Knight was before the villainess who had struck at his orc companion. She raised her hand to protect herself, unarmed for all her monstrous power, and offered a faint smile even as Christophe swung and cut through both the arm and the head behind it with barely any resistance.

"Disappear," the Mirror Knight snarled, as she dropped lifeless to the ground.

But there was no time to waste, he knew. Hakram Deadhand lay on the ground, twisted in pain as corruption began to spread through his body. If the Mirror Knight did not act, the orc would be dead – or much, much worse.

"Gods forgive me," Christophe prayed, and like a butcher he *hacked*.

The arm, the leg, most of the side – he cut before the demonic taint could spread, and left his ally broken and bleeding. Unconscious. But it was done, he thought. Now there were only the fae left and –

"Christophe," Sidonia screamed, "the corpse!"

The stranger's remains convulsed, once, twice, and a heartbeat later the Hells broke loose.

The first thing to go was the wards, and it was all downhill from there.

—

Silence reigned for a long moment. The Black Queen, gripping the card close, set down the Emperor above the sole affray she'd opened.

"Ah," the Wandering Bard murmured, "so that's where the Concocter went. If you're lucky, she'll be able to save your Adjutant, true. Or at least keep him alive."

"The Mirror Knight is many things, but a poor fighter is not one of them," the Black Queen said, voice tight. "He'll slaughter her a way through the thick of it, come what may."

She cleared away the affray she had already conceded, her every movement speaking to barely controlled rage.

"One to one," the Wandering Bard said. "Let's hasten this along, shall we?"

One affray had still lain untouched, the one she had never explained, and with a hum the Intercessor took out the Tower once more and placed it above that very affray, obscuring the Empress. The Black Queen's eyes narrowed.

"You are trying to drown my first victory," she said.

"I am succeeding," the Wandering Bard corrected. "The Empress was from the beginning our old friend Cordelia Hasenbach, who is still headed this way. There are many ways to skin a cat, Catherine, and I know every last one of them."

—

The illusion broke and Frederic Goethal smiled at the wave of exclamations from the soldiers, who saw the truth of his offered surrender laid bare by the sword at his feet. He turned to offer the Repentant Magister a bow but found that her eyes were widening.

He turned to find the Red Axe with his sword in hand, just as the blade hacked into the side of his neck.

—

The Black Queen's eyes strayed to the last remaining of the initial affrays, where Temperance still led the dance. The Intercessor caught her out and her lips quirked.

"Worried about Archer?" the Wandering Bard said. "Have a little faith."

"Funny thing about the Magician," the Black Queen said. "I happen to have one as well."

She dropped it atop Temperance, cocking an eyebrow.

"Must have been a mistake of some sort," Catherine Foundling said. "I would never accuse you of *cheating*."

"Quite right," the Wandering Bard grinned, stuffing cards back into her sleeves.

—

Archer put her useless side in the way, letting the knife blow through so that she might get a good strike in for her trouble. The blade tore through her coat but slid against the mail, the Fallen Monk trying to tackle her down but letting out a grunt when she stabbed him in the shoulder twice. He was strong, though, and heavy. If it kept up he'd be able to force her down, and then she'd be in trouble — save if Adanna... and there she was. The Blessed Artificer threw herself at the Fallen Monk's legs, trying to snare them with her arms and refusing to give even when the man kicked her and her spectacles gave with a crack. Indrani took the opportunity to push *him* down, toppling atop of him as he fell and stabbing away still. That cursed fat, it made hard to get at the parts that actually *mattered*. Half a dozen bleeding wounds, not a single one that would kill a Named.

The three of them were in a messy, writhing pile of violence but another kick finally pushed Adanna away, sending her rolling as she groaned in pain, and though Indrani got in a good knifing through the Monk's armpit the man still struck her across the face with his full strength. Archer felt her nose break and she rolled away, just in time to see the Fallen Monk crawl to his feet. She dropped her knife, snatching his ankle through the robe, and with her own full strength *squeezed*. Bone broke and the man screamed, but he tore out of her grasp and winked out of sight. Fuck, Indrani thought. That'd been their shot, and it wouldn't work twice. The Monk was in a bad place, but so were they and she couldn't use her bow one-handed.

"Auréole."

Indrani, wondering if she was going mad, found that her body was softly glowing. So was Adanna's, who was moaning as she tried to get up with trembling knees. So was the silhouette of an overweight man, glowing where there would otherwise seemingly be only air.

"Roland, you clever little artefact princess you," Archer praised, swallowing a scream as she rose to her feet with her knife in hand.

The Rogue Sorcerer, some wooden casting rod in one hand and a handful of shining rings on the other, was standing his ground as the silhouette of the Fallen Monk rushed him. The rod went up,

there was a blasting sound and the Monk was forced back a mere foot. It didn't matter, because Indrani was moving too and she was fucking *done* with this one. The man reappeared in his entirety for the blink of an eye as he turned towards her just in time for his mouth to open in surprise as her extended arm slid the longknife just under his chin and all the way through this throat. He gurgled wetly, for a moment, and with a pained scream Archer turned her wrist and ripped her way out in a spray of blood.

"There," Indrani panted. "Try to walk *that* off, Monk."

She then slumped to her knees, eyes closing.

"If I might offer healing, Archer?" the Rogue Sorcerer gently asked.

"Why are you here, Roland?" Indrani asked. "You should be headed for the Severance with Cocky."

"I began to head there at first," the man agreed, "but halfway there realized that no one had stabilized the wards. It would be a shame to all die in the immediate wake of our victory, yes?"

"Zeze should be fixing them," Archer said. "It's probably already done."

"I checked moments ago," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "No work has been done."

Indrani went still. Where, then was Masego?

—

The Wandering Bard's head wrenched from faraway, returning to the small room she was sharing with her foe. Catherine Foundling offered her a hard smile and slowly, surely placed a third black pawn on the table.

"Three," the Queen of Lost and Found state. "Now it ends."

"Some affrays have yet to end," the Wandering Bard said. "You are—"

"I have no interest in your game," Catherine said.

Disdainful, she slapped the table's surface and the piles of cards blended in chaos.

"Your first mistake," Catherine said, knocking down a pawn with a flicked finger, "was believing you understand what it means to be part of a band of five. You *don't*. Like Ranger, you drift in and out of stories and bands without ever really being part of them. It's temporary to you, not something you give yourself over to.

I'll wager you never had a moment like I did at the Battle of Dormer, when the Woe blended together and became part of a greater whole."

"If you want the right to lecture me," the Bard mockingly echoed, "w-"

"Your second mistake," Catherine said, knocking down a pawn with a flicked finger, "was telling me what you wanted. The song I already knew had stuck too much in my head to be a coincidence, but then you told me the exact nature of you what you were after by drawing the comparison between us. The Doddering Sage warned me: *rival*, thief, successor. You've been trying to make my Name into one shaped by opposition to you."

"And why would I ever want that?" the Intercessor said, tone calm.

"Because if it's that, it's not something else," Catherine smiled. "Whatever it is growing into, slowly but surely. And that is a balm onto my heart, Intercessor, because for you to intervene means that outside the walls of this place *we are winning*."

"You very much want that to be true, don't you?" the Wandering Bard said. "But-"

"Your third mistake," Catherine said, knocking down the last pawn with a flicked finger, "was never asking the right question until it was too late. Until I'd earned my way to this, one pawn at a time."

"And what would that be?" the Intercessor asked.

"*Why haven't you been using the Night since you came in?*" Catherine Foundling smiled, all teeth and malice.

The Wandering Bard went still.

"Hierophant," she said.

The Black Queen threw the card going by the same name on the table, contemptuous.

"There," she said. "And choke on it. We have what we need, Masego."

The darkness in the back of the room peeled away, its control long wrested away from the Black Queen, and revealed a tall man with blind and burning eyes.

"Finally," the Hierophant said. "My preparations are finished."

"Odds?" the Black Queen asked.

"Half and half, I'd say," the vivisector of miracles said. "And that is without considering your end of things."

"Quite the trick," the Intercessor admitted. "But it means nothing."

"I thought so too, at first," the Black Queen said. "But then, you're not the *goddess* of stories are you? You don't have a mantle, just a duty. In the end, you are still Named. The oldest and trickiest of our kind, but that does not change the nature of what you are."

"This is getting tedious," the Wandering Bard said, and blinked her eyes.

Silence was broken only by the sound of Catherine Foundling smiling a blackguard's smile.

"Your tricks can be learned," the Black Queen said. "They can be blocked. And you're in *our* little corner of the Pattern now."

"You've won nothing," the Wandering Bard said, tone arctic. "The affrays-"

"You were playing a game," Catherine Foundling chided, "while I was playing the Game. You bled us, but I have three mistakes now. We *earned* this, through that victory and the weight of what you did to us."

The Black Queen rose to her feet, leaning forward over the table as the Wandering Bard leaned back.

"Eyes open, Hierophant," the Carrion Lord's daughter said. "If she still has a miracle up her sleeve, be ready to *kill it* next time."

Her wrist flicked, a knife falling into her palm, and ever as the Intercessor opened her mouth to speak Catherine Foundling slit her throat. Marguerite of Baillons twitched, clutching her wound, and cards went flying from her sleeves as two of the Woe coldly watched. It was only Catherine that thought, for a moment, that there had been a strange glint in the Intercessor's eyes. Relieved, triumphant, afraid?

Eventually, the body ceased moving.

"So?" the Black Queen asked.

"I could not catch the soul," the Hierophant said, "but even when in danger she cannot leave my bindings. It is possible she is dead and has gone Beyond."

Catherine Foundling looked at the corpse for a long time, clenching her fingers and unclenching them.

"No," she decided, "this isn't the last we've seen of her."

She dragged herself up, tired but knowing there was still chaos to put to order.

"We've got work to do, Masego," the Black Queen said. "Let's get to it."

Neither of them looked back, as they left, and so neither saw that by the sheerest of coincidence the struggle had left untouched one of the affrays – the Empress, the Tower – save for one card that'd fallen from the Bard's sleeve in her death throes.

Judgement lay with the Tower between it and the Empress, speckled with blood.

—

She breathed out and opened her eyes, a starry sky sprawled above her.

In and out, slowly. Unmistakably. She was still alive, though no longer Marguerite de Baillons. The Wandering Bard, the Keeper of Stories, closed her eyes and repressed the urge to scream until her voice went hoarse.

"I did it all right," she said. "And still? *Still?*"

Her nails dug into her palms until they bled.

"Fine," she whispered. "Fine. The hard way it is, then, *and on your heads be it.*"

Chapter 23: Repercussions

"Giving battle is as being made to wed one of two ugly sisters—even if you get the prettier of the bargains to be had, it is still a dreadful affair all around."

— Princess Clothilde of Arans, the Cautious

It was a subtle thing, but when you were looking for it the change was noticeable. There was now a certain weight to the place that'd not been there before, a resistance to power that'd earlier waned. My steps stuttered and Masego moved halfway towards glancing at me in question, though in truth his eyes of glass were merely staring at me through his own head.

"I think the wards were just restored," I said.

"Possible," Hierophant acknowledged. "May I?"

I nodded, suppressing a grimace, and the air shivered with the power of his aspect. The Hierophant used his will to **Wrest** the Night away from me, as he had earlier when we'd trapped the Intercessor, and I gave token resistance before letting him win. We'd found out if worked better if he got control by winning a conflict, even the resistance was largely ceremonial. I didn't much enjoy the sensation of having my power stripped from me, or of losing for that matter – I'd never been one to enjoy defeat even when the real victory was in throwing the fight. Masego shaped the Night into small pinpricks, gathering dewlike drops of it with a finesse I could not replicate despite my best efforts, and detonated them one after another. He varied the size of the pinpricks according to some eldritch arithmetic, observing the detonations with care, and only when the last had vanished did he slowly nod.

"Someone has activated the emergency wards," Hierophant told me. "Repairing the true arrays will take time and mage cabals, but these will be enough to prevent further incursions by extradimensional entities."

"Will it keep them in?" I asked.

"So long as they do not force one of the designated gates, yes," Masego said. "Though I do not speak in absolutes, as sufficiently powerful fae can brute force their way through such things and demons usually require wards tailored to them."

"We might have eight demons on the loose, Zeze," I cursed. "They need to be contained, and quick."

The tall mage offered me a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry about them escaping into Creation," he said. "In nearly all observed cases, they will first devour the entire pocket dimension before trying to move beyond it."

"And," I slowly said, just to confirm, "by 'pocket dimension', in this case you mean the Arsenal?"

"Yes," he smiled, visibly pleased by my understanding.

"The Arsenal, where we and a lot of people and priceless artefacts are?" I continued.

"Yes," Masego agreed once more. "So do not worry, since if the demons do get into Creation we will be *long* dead – or at least no longer truly aware, as living vectors of demonic infection."

The whole reassuring thing was a bit of a work in progress with him, I mused, but at least his heart was in the right place.

"Well, that's certainly something," I muttered. "Would you mind releasing the Night?"

"Of course," Hierophant agreed.

Much as he immediately complied when I asked him that, I thought it telling that he always kept the Night until that very moment. Indrani had told me he'd taken the loss of his magic well, and from what I'd seen of him I'd tended to agree, but no one took that harsh a loss without it leaving some scars. No one liked losing power, especially if you'd been skilled at using it, and there had been few mages more skilled than Masego.

"Let's go," I said. "The sooner we get to the Knot the better."

"I still do not know why we are headed there," Masego reminded me.

He got walking, though, and I got limping. It'd do.

"The Sinister Physician is there," I said.

I'd made sure of that, assigning him healing duties at the crossroads of the Arsenal before disappearing.

"He has already seen to your wound," Hierophant pointed out.

My hand almost went to the still-blood mark on my neck where the Fallen Monk's knife had sunk into my flesh. That'd been a nasty surprise. I wasn't a fool, I'd suspected that a traitor was going to come after me, but the metaphysical Night tripwires I'd put up on the stairs after the Poet and the Monk went up hadn't warned me of the coming backstab at all. I'd lost all hold on Night, maybe because of some aspect of the Monk's, and it'd poured out of me as a sea of blackflame. It'd gone around the Fallen Monk, though I'd felt him try and fail to seize control of it, but still singed him some just by the heat and killed every fae at the bottom of the Belfry besides. That'd been enough to spook him into fleeing, thank the Crows, because if he'd actually stuck around...

I'd had little to no control over the Night for an uncomfortable amount of time after the blow, and I'd come closer than I liked to admit to simply bleeding out. Even when I'd achieved mastery once more, the best I'd been able to do was prevent the cut veins from killing me by freezing blood flow and limp my way to the closest healer, the Sinister Physician. Roland might have been able to help, but with fae still up there and other potential traitors it would have been a risk – easier to feign my own death, and slide the Monk's knife into the corpse most closely resembling me I had at hand. I'd figured it would warn Archer when she came to try to find me, and I'd been right: she'd

grasped my intentions without a word ever being spoken between us.

"Catherine?" Masego gently said.

I shook my head. My thoughts were drifting, as much from the blood loss as the exhaustion.

"I sent him there as a beacon of sorts," I told Zeze. "He is a healer, in a known and easily accessible position. Any Named from my indirect conflicts with the Intercessor-"

"These *affrays*," Hierophant carefully said, as if trying out the word.

"I was trying to protect things, or people, and she was trying to break them," I agreed. "But if anyone got seriously hurt and they aren't dead, they'll be headed to the Knot and the Sinister Physician – because he's there and visible and obviously helpful."

"A beacon to gather people," Masego frowned, eyes swivelling as he thought. "So by heading there now, we will learn what has happened in your 'affrays'."

"I have some idea," I said. "If the cards were truthful, anyway. But it should get me the information quickly and in depth, yeah. There's also another use."

He half-turned towards me but said nothing, the invitation silent.

"There'll be mages and soldiers there," I said, "as well as Named. If we're going to contain the demons and the fae before this gets any worse, we're going to need all of those."

I was *not* looking forward to tangling with demons again. Hopefully Hakram wouldn't be too gravely wounded from whatever it was the Bard had arranged to hurt him, I thought, fingers clenching. A leg lost, an arm or perhaps an eye? Gods, why was he always the one who ended paying in flesh for our mistakes? The Mirror Knight would have taken up the sword, so if we were lucky he'd cut down parts of the opposition before we got there. If we were *unlucky*, well... Best be prepared to put down a corrupted Christophe of Pavanie, wielding a sword that'd been made to kill a lesser god. As much as you could ever prepare for something like that, anyway. The grim thoughts stayed with me as we passed through stone hallways nearly indistinguishable from one another, hurrying as much as we could without running outright.

The Knot was a riot of activity when we stumbled in from one of the upper halls, the Sinister Physician having organized what looked like an impressive field infirmary from Arsenal supplies.

Half the cots were filled with soldiers, only the most lightly wounded of them kept awake instead of placed under a sleeping spell. Priests and mages were swarming all around but the Sinister Physician himself was seeing to a pair of cots set apart from the rest and from each other. In more ways than one, I thought, since one of the people on the cots was bound by leather straps and had half a tenth of crossbowmen trained on her at all times. That did not bode well. The healers in spell and Light parted for the two of us, offering words I only paid half attention to as we headed towards the Physician and my fear was confirmed.

"Fuck," I muttered under my breath.

One of those two wounded was Frederic Goethal, the Prince of Brus. The Kingfisher Prince as well, but it was the other princely title that'd be trouble in the coming days.

"Your Majesty," the Sinister Physician greeted me. "I am glad to see you in good health."

"As I am glad to be," I replied. "Would I be correct in assuming the woman tied down is the Red Axe?"

"She is," Masego said, before the other villain could.

The Physician eyed Hierophant with mild irritation but nodded.

"Her peculiarities mean initial treatment had to be done by priests, naturally," the Physician told me. "But I have been continuing the work with alchemies, which she does not seem to affect."

"How bad?" I asked.

"Prince Frederic will have scarring on the side of his neck, but no more than that," he replied. "Part of it was the Magister's stabilizing intervention, but there appears to have been another manner of interference. He was struck with his own sword, which seems to have sorcery laid into the steel that made it reluctant – if not incapable – to kill its own wielder. The blow was deep but avoided the jugular."

I glanced at Masego, who nodded.

"The Bitter Blacksmith, by which I mean not Helmgard but her brother, would be capable of this," Hierophant said. "He has the Gift, and skill with it."

Thank the Gods for him, then. I rather liked the Prince of Brus, and that aside his death would have been a political mess of legendary proportion.

"And the Red Axe?" I asked.

"Hovering at the edge of life and death," the sallow-skinned man frankly said. "She was shot by twenty-three crossbow bolts, including one that pierced her liver and two that went in her lungs. If another had been half an inch to the side, it would have taken her through the heart and she would have died before getting here."

My eyes moved to the woman in question, prone in her cot. She didn't look like much, not that people ever did when they'd lost that much blood. Brown hair, tanned skin, muscled arms. Not tall, either, even prone I could tell as much. A lot of trouble for such a small package. When I tore away my gaze, I found the Sinister Physician was studying me closely.

"Despite my best efforts and those of the priests," the Sinister Physician mildly said, "it is, of course, possible she will die. These things do happen, Your Majesty."

It was an offer, however indirectly made.

If I were a better woman, I would have refused it outright. Without hesitation. Instead I considered the notion. If the heroine died bedridden, shot by soldiers, I would not need to have her executed and deal with the outrage from Above's crowd over the matter. It would also nip in the bud the mess that would come from a Named having tried to murder a ruling prince of Procer, and how that was simply not something Cordelia Hasenbach would be able to let go. It'd be murder, of course. Sure, the Physician would be the one carrying out the deed for me, but the order would have been mine. The weight of this would be on my shoulders. But what was one more life, these days, one more splash of blood on the stone? How many had I killed by my hand or by my words?

I was a little late for scruples, wasn't it?

If it were found out, though, it's be a disaster. I'd be breaking the Truce and Terms and given my position in that arrangement the very foundation of them would be rocked. So long as the Sisters were with me, though, I was beyond truth-telling even if the heroes had suspicions. *It's a secret, and the Arsenal is a gathering place of Named.* Yet that was not an absolute rule, a certainty. If dark deeds were done cleverly, and cleverly hidden, they could remain secret. I clenched my fingers and unclenched them, looking at the Red Axe once more as the silence grew long. I should have felt pity for her, I thought, or perhaps sympathy – she had been forged in pain, like most Named, and it had led a pitiless ancient to make use of her. Yet I did not. All I could see was the consequences of her actions, all the way down to Keter swallowing this continent whole. There was no place for pity in that vision.

Yet I had made rules, hadn't I? Rules to govern these conflicts between heroes and villains, between Named and laws. The Truce and Terms had been raised in no small part by my hand, and they had been my design since their inception. They were, in the end, the first step towards the Liesse Accords becoming truth instead of remaining ink. If I broke those rules, if I didn't have faith in them, then who would? Who *should*? How could I ask anyone to follow them when I broke them at my own leisure whenever I thought it best? One of the Old Tyrants, Terribilis the Second, had once written that you should never make a law you did not intend to enforce – because allowing it to be broken lessened all other laws.

I would be lessening all I had built if I did this. Even if I got away with it.

"It would be best," I finally said, "if she made it through."

"I am sure she will, Your Majesty," the Sinister Physician said, just as mildly as he had offered her death. "I will return to my duties, if you have no further questions."

"Please do," I replied.

I watched him walk away, Hierophant standing at my side.

"Did he just offer to murder the Red Axe?" Zeze leaned in to ask, sounding puzzled.

"Quiet," I murmured, but nodded.

"He could have made it plainer what it was he was saying," Masego resentfully muttered.

He wasn't all that troubled at the notion of the killing, or that I'd seriously considered it, but then for all that his family had made him essentially untouchable Hierophant *had* spent much of his childhood and adolescence in Praes. People killed themselves over theatre seats, there. Politics saw enough red flow to rival rivers. I realized a moment later that I did still have a question for the Physician, though I supposed asking one of the officers would serve just as well. The villain had mentioned that Nephele's sorcery had kept the Kingfisher Prince alive long enough for him to be brought to a healer whose metaphorical gourd wasn't running empty, but I'd never actually learned where she went after that.

A slower, more careful look around told me there was less of a force to muster here than I would have liked. Maybe thirty soldiers, from those a few of mine and more from the Dominion. A dozen priests were seeing to the wounded, with half that in mages – most of them Proceran, by the looks of it, so barely passable as war casters – and it wasn't like I could strip them from the

infirmary without endangering those being seen to. The lightly wounded would survive that, but those who'd lost a limb or worse would be at risk. *We'll all be at risk if demons devour this place*, I reminded myself, *and none of the soldiers here will do much difference if a Duke of Autumn finds this place.*

I'd moved on to considering which officer to approach, as the ranking one here seemed to be a Levantine captain but my natural leaning was to rustle up a few Army sergeants and get my people forming up, when the first question I would have asked answered itself. The Repentant Magister emerged from one of the side halls, escorted by a good forty soldiers – two full lines from the Army of Callow – and the Blade of Mercy. Her eyes found mine and I nodded a greeting, watching as she thanked the ranking lieutenant with courtesy and headed straight towards me. *Us*, I was reminded when Masego shuffled silently at my side.

"She is on the very edge of burning out," Hierophant told me. "And nearly out of trinkets."

I nodded in acknowledgement, then pitch my voice low.

"If you wrested her sorcery from her grasp," I quietly asked, "would she still be at risk of that when you used it?"

"I am uncertain," he admitted after a moment. "The nature of the Night and your own prodigious affinity for it make you a poor subject to use as the base of a theory."

"You haven't experimented with the aspect?" I said, genuinely surprised.

He'd been the one who pushed me hardest to experiment with the limits of my mantle, when I'd been Sovereign of Moonless Nights.

"Not in a manner that would physically cripple or kill anyone should I misstep," Masego chided me. "There is much that can still be studied before only these mysteries remain."

Fair enough, I mused. The Repentant Magister was upon us, so the conversation ended, and though in other circumstances I would have been less than pleased to see the Blade of Mercy at her heels today I was even glad to see *him*.

"Your Majesty," Nephele greeted me, offering a bow. "Lord Hierophant."

"Nephele," Masego replied.

"Lady Eliade," I replied. "Blade of Mercy."

The boy hesitated but received an almost admonishing glance from the sorceress.

"Queen Catherine," the hero said, curtly bowing as well.

He did not greet Masego, not that Zeze cared in the slightest. By the fade of the glare behind his eyecloth, he was actually looking elsewhere while pretending to be paying attention.

"I understand I have you to thank for saving the life of the Kingfisher Prince, Lady Eliade," I said.

"I cannot claim to have saved him, only delayed until salvation came by other hands," the Repentant Magister replied. "But I receive your sentiment gratefully regardless."

"It's true, then," the Blade of Mercy said. "It was you who sent Prince Frederic to protect the Red Axe."

He was speaking somewhat rudely, but I could live with a little rudeness. Now was not the time to have a fit over manners.

"The Red Axe was used to sunder the Truce and Terms by a foe that kills through plots, the ancient creature known as the Wandering Bard," I replied. "I have been trying to warn people of her for years, but there has been... opposition from your side of the fence to having her declared an enemy. We are all paying the price for that dithering today."

There was no way the Grey Pilgrim would be able to keep fighting my push to have the Bard declared a foreign and hostile entity, one it would be treason to deal with, after the events of the last night and day. That didn't mean I wouldn't have him pay a tithe of blood and pride over this, though, or darken the Intercessor's name as thoroughly as I could with anyone who'd listen.

"Then your reputation was attainted without reason, and I offer apology for it," the Blade of Mercy stiffly said. "It was believed that you were attempting to use this affair to make the Chosen into your vassals, using the deeds of the Red Axe as a pretext to extend your influence."

It wasn't like he'd suddenly come to believe I was a good woman or ally, I thought as I studied him, but rather that he was perfectly willing to believe that there was another Evil out there who *had* been using the Red Axe for their own nefarious plot. Rubies to piglets he was already thinking of the Bard as villain in his head.

"It takes character to own to a mistake," I replied, offering a nod and nothing more. "But if I may dispense with idle talk, there is a peril we need to address. I've reason to believe that there are demons loose in the Arsenal."

"Gods be good," Nephele hoarsely whispered. "Demons, plural?"

I nodded, appreciating her grasp of the gravity of the situation. Not that I'd expected otherwise of her. Coming from Stygia – and from the Magisterium at that, whose ranks boasted the finest diabolists of the Free Cities – she should have a decent idea of how *nasty* even a single demon could get.

"Where?" the Blade of Mercy sharply said.

"Near the Severity," I said. "There might be as many as eight."

"The wards will not contain them forever, even if they were unleashed inside them, which we do not know for certain," Hierophant warned, having resumed interest in the conversation. "The anchors are on the inside, as the pattern was primarily designed to resist assault from the outside. Eventually they will corrupt or destroy the anchors, and the wards will collapse."

"We need to contain them before it gets to that," I bluntly said. "Blade, are you capable of destroying their kind?"

Not all heroes could, I had learned, but the boy used Light and lots of it. The odds were good he was one of those with the ability.

"Yes," the Blade of Mercy said. "In principle. I have never encountered one before."

Gods, but I had the strangest headache. Was I forgetting something? No matter.

"Then we will do what we can to set up those kills," I said. "My priority is containment, so that we can gather numbers and Named to deal with this more safely, but none can be allowed to run wild."

"You'll be needing wards for that," Nephele seriously said. "And while in other circumstances I might be able to provide-"

"You are close to overdrawing," Hierophant interrupted. "We are aware. I have trained none of the mage around us here, which means none should be capable of the required work, but Catherine _"

"I'll conscript half so you can borrow their power," I agreed.

Or at least however many of the six weren't close to burning out themselves. The priests would have been able to see to most wounds, so it shouldn't be the case, but mages in an infirmary did a lot more than healing spells – the way so many of the gravely wounded men were spelled to sleep made that plain enough.

"I will choose them myself," Hierophant said.

"Use my name if you have to," I shrugged. "Lady Eliade, if you'd accompany him?"

Couldn't hurt to have a gentler touch along when gathering a few mandated volunteers.

"It would be my pleasure," the heroine replied with a smile.

Good, then she got my meaning by sending her along. I cast a look at the Blade of Mercy, noticing his hesitant look. He wanted to stick by the Repentant Magister's side but couldn't think of a reason why he should. Gods, how old was he? He couldn't be older than twenty. It was easy to hate the sneer and the accusations, too easy to forget that I was actually looking at a *kid*.

"With me," I said. "We're going to procure a few soldiers."

The boy jerkily nodded, falling in at my side.

"How old are you, Antoine of Lange?" I asked.

The boy offered me a mulish look.

"Nineteen," he still said. "There is no need to use my personal name, Blade will suffice."

A lie, I decided, or at least an exaggeration. He must be younger; it was a rare thing for that lie to be spoken the other way around.

"I was seventeen, the first time I fought a demon," I quietly said. "I'd fought devils before, and Named of some power, so I figured I knew what I was in for."

That, at last, got his undivided attention. His eyes were wide and went still.

"The fight itself was a terror," I said, "like few things before or since, but it was the aftermath that scraped me raw. The demon laid seeds of corruption within some of my soldiers. Brave men and women, who'd done nothing but their duty."

"What happened to them?" the Blade of Mercy softly asked.

"We killed all those who'd been corrupted," I said. "As gently as we could, but they were no less dead for it."

The boy swallowed.

"Why are you telling me this?" Antoine asked.

"The Mirror Knight is your friend, as I heard it," I said. "So I'm telling you now when you can still prepare yourself. He might

be lost, Blade of Mercy. Corruption spares no one, and all it takes is a drop."

"He is strong," the boy insisted.

"Then pray they've not made something warped of him," I said. "Else that strength will be turned against us."

I left him to think on that, limping my way to the two lines that'd been Nephele's earlier escort. One of regulars I noted, and one that was a mix: on tenth of crossbows, another of heavies. The senior lieutenant was an orc, who introduced himself proudly as I approached.

"Lieutenant Inger, ma'am, it's an honour."

Herself, then. My mistake.

"Lieutenant," I replied, nodding amiably. "I've a task for you and your soldiers."

"I am at your pleasure," she replied, fangs bared eagerly.

"Before I forget, though," I said. "Where were you escorting Lady Eliade?"

"She meant to head towards the Chancel, so that the wards might be fixed," the lieutenant told me. "Yet she sensed them being established again on the way, so we turned back."

I hummed in approval. A good call by Nephele on both parts: a good use of her expertise and exhausted state, then a decisive cut of her losses when her effort proved unnecessary. From the corner of my eye I saw the Blade of Mercy coming closer, though the boy remained far enough he wasn't exactly standing with me so much as in my extended vicinity.

"This will be for volunteers only," I told Lieutenant Inger. "If you'd allow me to address your men?"

"You'll find no dragging feet among us, Warlord," the orc assured me. "But to have you address them would be a privilege."

Masego and the Magister looked nearly done, two mages already following them, so I didn't have long if I didn't want to start wasting time in a situation where it was precious. But I owed my soldiers, given what I was about to ask of them, what honesty I could offer. Lieutenant Inger barked out an order and my legionaries fell into ranks crisply, offering hearty salutes as I limped up in front of them. Rows of expectant, eager faces waiting for some stirring speech I could not offer. I'd not do them the insult of cloaking this with the appearance of glory where there was none to be found.

"I'll be brief," I told them, "and blunt. Chaos has the run of this place, and it will get worse from here: demons were loosed and we don't know how many or how contained they are."

That sobered them right quick, though not as much as it should have. *I have won too many unexpected victories*, I thought. It was the foundation of my reign, this ability to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, but it had grown into a legend I was not always the equal to. There was no clever plan that would keep demons from melting them like wax, no surprising turnabout to reveal at the last moment. I could see in their eyes that they believed there was one, that the Black Queen would come through once more no matter the enemy, and it tasted like ash in my mouth.

"I'll be heading out with Lord Masego and the two heroes you've been escorting, as well as three mages," I told them. "We mean to contain this madness until sufficient strength can be assembled to destroy it outright."

In other circumstances I'd settle for a binding and a very deep hole, but if we had the might to outright annihilate a few demons I'd take the opportunity without complain.

"There will be fae and Named, some of them might be corrupted already," I said. "Not knowing the face and nature of our enemies, there can be no guarantees that our methods will be able to contain them. And so I ask you all to come with us, into the dark"

There was a roar of approval, and blades were smacked against shields, but I raised a hand to quell it. I would take them with me, because they would be useful – needed – but I would not let them pretend this was some sort of glorious adventure.

"I will take only volunteers," I said, and my hand rose once more to end the clamour of volunteering about to erupt, "but let me be perfectly clear about what I am asking of you. None of you can *kill* a demon. Swords and arrows cannot do it. What I am asking you is to stand between the mages and the horrors, to buy them the precious time that will make the difference."

I'd asked silence of them, and silence they gave me.

"Even those of you who survive," I said, "will likely be lessened in some way. That is the ugly truth of fighting demons, that there cannot ever be a real victory. There is no cowardice in avoiding this fight: *I* would, if I could."

I met their gazes, breathing out.

"But I cannot, and so I ask for volunteers," I simply said.

I could see the fear in them now and I knew I'd put it there. For a moment I wondered if I had been too candid but regretted the thought almost instantly. I could and had spent the lives of my men, those who had sworn oaths to me, but I'd not do it while lying to their faces. There were some who called me a soldier queen, and deep down I knew there was truth to the sobriquet.

If I was queen of anything at all, it was the likes of these soldiers before me.

"You'll go, won't you?" Lieutenant Inger asked, gravelly voice cutting sharp across the silence.

"I will," I said.

"You always go," the orc said, eyes hard, hands clenched. "And so we follow. I volunteer."

And so they went, one after the other, even after my every warning.

Forty soldiers, and I was left to wonder at how sometimes pride could feel like grieving.

Chapter 24: Like A Hanging Sword

"Loyalty to an unworthy prince is treason against the Gods Above, for it places that prince before the teachings of the Heavens themselves."

– Extract from "The Faith of Crowns", by Sister Salienta

Four Named, three mages and forty legionaries.

It wasn't a large company to take into a demon hunt, but in hallways and narrow rooms being too many would be a disadvantage anyway. It'd be a lot more useful to be able to move swiftly and without getting in each other's way than to have another forty bodies to throw into the maw of the enemy. I'd have taken more mages if there were any to spare, mind you, but those didn't grow on trees. I'd sent runners out to gather reinforcements as quickly as possible and send them our way, but I doubted they'd arrive in time to make a difference – whether the demons got to run loose or not would probably already have been decided by the time the second wave made it to the fight.

We set out briskly even as I arranged our formation so that it wouldn't result in immediate collapse if one of the demons got the drop on us. A shield wall would be useless, so instead a tenth of regulars in a loose skirmish formation took the front. The sole tenth of heavies behind them, their tall shields meant to buy time for the soldiers behind them: crossbowmen, spread out both so they could fire from broad angle and so that Named would

be able slip between them. Then came those same Named, Hierophant closer to the back where the three Gifted whose gifts he would be using stood, and behind that our rearguard of ten regulars.

The junior lieutenant was with those in the back, so that we'd still have an officer even if Lieutenant Inger died up front where she stood with the other tenth of regulars.

"For the four of us," I told the other Named, "the tactics are simple enough. I won't enquire too deeply about your bag of tricks or try to tell you how to fight with it, but I want our priorities established before we find the enemy."

Or the enemy finds us, I silently added.

"You are the seasoned battle commander among us," the Repentant Magister said, "and you've fought demons before. You will not be gainsaid."

I glanced at the Blade of Mercy, who silently nodded, and considered the potential powers struggle a done thing. Masego knew our business well enough and would not argue, though I still jabbed my elbow into his side to make sure he was actually listening.

"If we're lucky, the demons come at us from the front," I said. "Most of them are aggressive, in a tactical sense, which is where our first three lines come in: my legionaries will slow them down as much as possible."

My fingers clenched, knowing full well that the slowing would come through dead bodies and the corruption of the still-living.

"That's when we come in," I said. "After the crossbows fire, Lady Eliade and I will use what means we have to try to pin down the demon. Even if we succeed, it'll be temporary, which is when Hierophant will attempt a binding."

The Blade of Mercy shuffled on his feet, as if afraid he'd been forgot.

"There are no guarantees that will work," I said, "and even if it does, we can't simply leave the demon there: we need a killing blow, which will be provided by the Blade of Mercy."

Nods all round, until the Repentant Magister cocked her head to the side.

"I believe, Your Majesty, that your intention is not to try to slay all of these demons," she said.

It wasn't, because rolling the dice against eldritch abominations eight times in a row was a *shit* plan. Kind of her to indirectly reassure me she didn't believe me to be an idiot, though.

"No," I said. "We'll be trying to push through towards the room where the Severance was being kept. Hierophant, if you'd care to elaborate on why?"

I leaned a little closer.

"*Simply*, if you would," I murmured.

"There will likely still be ward foundations there," Masego said, "which I can use to trap the demons inside before closing the door on them."

He shot me a disgruntled look.

"Sword room good, demons go in," he peevishly added. "Much rejoicing. Was that simple enough, Catherine?"

"Rejoicing has three whole syllables," I replied without missing a beat. "A lackluster effort at best."

"Sometimes, when you fight other people, I root for you to get hit," he confessed.

"That's treason, you know," I gravely told him.

"It is not," he triumphantly said. "You kept saying that about a great many things, so I got my hands on a Callowan law codex. It's not treason to say you snore either, which you insisted to Indrani it was."

I heard the Repentant Magister politely cough into her hand to hide her laugh, while the Blade of Mercy looked away with slightly trembling shoulders.

"Tread carefully," I told him, "or I'll raise taxes on mage towers."

"I'll make it invisible," he defiantly said. "You can't collect taxes from an invisible tower."

"Don't think I won't contract it out to the fae if I have to," I warned.

He stared me down from the side of his head, before grudgingly nodding.

"Accusing you of snoring is treason," he offered.

Ah, selling out Indrani instead of admitting you were wrong. One of the classic retreat stratagems of the Woe, along with blaming anything from rain to mispronunciations on Akua's scheming.

"So is throwing wooden carvings at my court wizard," I granted him, magnanimous in my victorious tyranny.

He brightened at that, though for some reason Nephele's cheek went red. Had she thrown something at Masego's head? Curious as I was, now was hardly the time to ask. I'd leaned into the banter at least in part because it would distract the four of us – and also the soldiers all trying very hard to pretend they weren't listening – from the grimness ahead, lighten up the air some. But we were well into the Repository now and wariness was the order of the day from here on out. We passed through a sort of confluence of hallways, like a lesser Knot, where the marks of Named fighting against fae were evident. Nephele confirmed as much when I asked, as it had been her band that fought here, and added that there did not seem to be any missing bodies.

Thank the fucking Gods for that.

Hakram had fought here, I could tell from the way some tall rocklike fae had been slain, but I set the thought aside before it grew too dark. I'd done what I could by ensuring the Concocter was there for Archer to send as reinforcements. Shy of the Sinister Physician himself, she was probably the best healer in the Arsenal. We hurried along, quickening our pace to a near run, and we'd just passed the corpse of another fae when a shivering scream sounded in the distance ahead. I felt it go through my soldiers, my allies, through my own bones. It'd sounded human, or at least ripped out of a human throat, but there'd been something... wrong about it.

"At least one is out, looks like," I said, forcing my voice to sound even. "Advance with caution, swords out."

I'd offered up my calm and it was drawn from by those who needed it – there was no need for a harangue here, simple confidence would serve the same purpose better. From the corner of my eye I caught Nephele staring at the back of the neck of my soldiers, and I raised a brow. It was man, Callowan by the paleness and the flush.

"Lady Eliade?" I asked.

"Please call a halt," she quietly asked.

I did, and a moment later the Repentant Magister was at the legionary's side and asking him the permission to perform an exploratory cantrip. The light on the sorceress' fingers was barely visible and she spoke no incantation, but a moment later she withdrew her hand with a grim look on her face.

"We are facing a Host-Breaker," Nephele Eliade said.

I looked at Masego, expecting an elaboration.

"Demon of Terror," Hierophant said. "I know little of their kind, few in Praes have ever summoned them."

My fingers clenched at the words.

"They're that dangerous?" I asked, pitching my voice low.

If the *Empire* thought they were too risky to use, it boded very badly for our little crew.

"No," Masego replied. "But it is known they can be subsumed by Demons of Excess, which made them a highly unpopular choice among diabolists."

No doubt Wasteland nobility saw it as a faux pas, like a tasteless bracelet or using a floral poison during winter court. Nephele looked fascinated and sickened by what she'd gestured heard, but she focused on the dangers at hand.

"I know of them, Your Majesty," the Repentant Magister told me. "The Magisterium has used them for war in past years."

I nodded in appreciation, gesture for the Blade of Mercy to cease standing at the edge of the conversation and come in closer so he'd hear properly.

"What are we in for?" I asked.

"Fear, in essence," Nephele said. "It can be carried by sound or by sight, though like with all of their kind direct touch has the most powerful effect."

"That sounds dangerous and potentially lethal, but not horrifying," I said. "Which given my past experiences with demons lead me to believe means I'm missing something."

"Permanence of contamination, Catherine," Masego reminded me.

I blinked then finally put it together. He meant that the fear would *never* go away, and the contamination – the fear – would only grow worse with every scream or glimpse or touch. Yeah, that was closer to the kind of despicable fuckery I'd expected.

"There it is," I darkly muttered. "How quickly does the fear escalate?"

"My people say it comes in three steps," the Repentant Magister says. "Fear, which can still be treated by Light and alchemies. Dread, which puts men to flight they will never break from. And terror, which breaks the mind and ends only in death."

Charming. And it was starting to sound like fighting this would be a headache and a half.

"So we can't even look at it," I slowly said.

"There are enchantments which would protect people from the effects, if not for long and not against direct touch," she said, then bit her lip. "Yet I am in no state to lay them, not on so many. I do have an artefact whose effect is *similar*, but I did not make it to face demons and it will not protect nearly fifty people for more than moments. It has not the power."

"Trace the formula for the enchantment in the air," Masego said.

The Magister glanced at me and I nodded. Fine fingers left coppery traces in the air that Hierophant studied it for a moment before he sharply nodded.

"Now your artefact," he instructed.

Nephele, having discarded her hesitation, presented a ring in a pale and silvery metal, set with translucent stones whose shine was not natural.

"Ah, I see," Masego muttered. "Originally a torture spell, yes? To keep the mind from breaking under pain. The formulaic traces are still there."

The Repentant Magister, face grown ashen, silently nodded.

"It can be done," Hierophant decided. "Give me a moment."

Casually he reached towards one of the Proceran mages, seizing the man's magic with a ripple of will, and then he extracted the sorcery from the sorceress' artefact with a great deal more care. Lights spun up and formed themselves into runes – several wriggled their way out of my thoughts, which smacked of High Arcana – then rearranged themselves under Masego's dancing fingers and clucking tongue, before he finally let out a little noise of satisfaction. The runes collapsed onto themselves and formed into a series of small pinpricks of light that sunk back into the ring.

"There," the Hierophant said. "It will protect fifty people for a quarter hour, though the protection will be stripped permanently by contact with a demon. It will also break after use, Catherine, so spend it wisely."

The Repentant Magister was looking at him like he'd just knocked over a castle by blowing at it – split between disbelieving and awed. I sometimes forgot how brilliant Masego was, exceptional even among a people whose excellence in sorcery was legend. I thanked him and passed what we'd learned on to the two lieutenants, who in turn handled informing their soldiers. Advance resumed as I limped forward with the ring clutched tight between my fingers. Two corners we turned before another scream sounded and before it finished I broke the artefact – the demon

sounded close enough to warrant it. There was a pulse of light and warmth, then a sensation like a wool in my mind.

"Quarter hour starts," I called out. "We finish this quickly."

The third corner we turned, mere heartbeats later, led us to the sight of the waiting abomination. It was far – knowing sight and distance worked in its favour? – and currently unmoving, at least as much as such a thing could ever be. Corruption had been a revolting twisting of flesh, but this thing was of a different mold. At its heart was a black, faded body that evoked a snake or a slug, but most of it was made up of translucent black veils that spread out like trails and tails and wings, ever moving. Five moon-round eyes, two angled on each side and a larger crowning one, stared at us like the glare of a lighthouse through the fog. Behind it I glimpsed delicate trails on the ground that were like smoke made liquid. Blood from a wound or secretions?

"Don't step on the trails," I warned.

It was unlikely that my soldiers got to hear the latter part of the warning, as before I was finished speaking some of the demon's veil-like layers formed a triangular mouth between the eyes and it began *screaming*. I felt the protective enchantment on me begin to wane, like parchment being picked at by a swarm of insects. The screaming did not stop, for the demon needed no breath, and just like that our battle had begun. I reached for the Night even as Masego wrested power from our mages one after another in quick succession, but first blood went to my crossbowmen. Without flinching they brought up their weapons and fired a volley in good order, seven of the ten bolts fired landing on the enemy.

Four of those went through the veils, including one through the 'mouth', but they passed if through them as if they were smoke and ended up clattering on the stone further back. The last three shots, though, sunk into the dark flesh at the heart of the monster and remained there. The demon was unlikely to have been wounded by this but it was still moved to act even as liquid smoke began to sweat out of its flesh around where the bolts had sunk in. Layers upon layers of translucent blackness unfolded, splitting into wings and limbs and hooks as the demon skulked up the side of the wall and onto the ceiling with unnatural lightness.

"*Kytima*," the Repentant Magister said, a slender wand of iron in her hand.

The metal length shivered and spat out burst of transparent sorcery that struck at the demon's body even as I began to shape the Night I had gathered and Masego began to incant in the magetongue. The host-breaker was knocked down from the ceiling, slipping and falling but landing below with insect-like deftness.

It was still screaming, and when another salvo of bolts was fired upon it instead of trying to avoid it the demon simply convulsed. The four shots that'd tasted of its flesh went flying out and I hastily abandoned the cage of Night I'd been crafting, instead forming a sweeping scythe that would slap the projectiles aside. When the roiling Night came to touch the first bloodied bolt, though, it *winked out*.

Sve Noc had forcefully dismissed it from my grasp before it could make contact

Oh Merciless Gods, I realized. They're the Night, or close enough. So they're afraid that the taint might seep into it, and of what that would bring when it returns to them. It was not a senseless fear, I knew, but that was a hollow and bitter thing to tell myself as I watched the four bolts unnervingly find a targets. One glanced off a shield raised just in time, but the others sunk into flesh – neck or elbow or knee, the weak parts of the armour that brute force would be able to punch through.

My soldiers screamed loud enough that not even the demon's ceaseless hollering was able to drown it out.

I glimpsed their eyes turning white, the utter panic that seized them as their mouths foamed and their own screams served to amplify the spreading infection of the demon. Swallowing a snarl of bitter rage I swung out with Night, making a thick knot of it detonate in the air by the closest soldier's ear. Whether the shockwave killed or knocked her out I couldn't know, but before I could clear out a second the bolts fired into the demon earlier found flesh and my fingers clenched in dismay.

"Stop shooting," I screamed, but cacophony overruled me.

Hierophant stood utterly still behind me, save for his moving lips.

"Kytima," the Repentant Magister yelled again, knocking back the demon once more.

I put down another soldier with a detonation but the third taken had turned to flee and when the heavies got in his way he began hacking wildly at them, still screaming at the top of his lungs. The demon had landed almost flat on the ground when knocked back by Nephele, and instead of rising at full height once more it remained there and began slithering forward like a sea of tails and tentacles creeping along the ground. Gods, just the sight of it... A heartbeat later its veils burst open, like a peacock unfolding its tail, and the bolts it'd just taken went flying back. I was ready, this time: one after the other hanging orbs of Night exploded, scattering the bolts into the walls.

I only realized I'd missed the greater threat when one of the heavies struck down the last contaminated soldier and her blood went spurting out looking like liquid smoke. The soldier in plate began screaming in turn, clutching the dead soldier as he convulsed and so spraying smoke-blood everywhere. I lost four heavies in that heartbeat, but a lot more worrying was the single drop that landed on a crossbowman's cheek. I killed him without missing a beat, teeth grinding my mouth raw, and then I saw the Blade of Mercy pass by my side at a run and hatefully cursed.

"It has to be now," the boy screamed, and charged forward with his greatsword streaming behind him.

But the demon had never ceased moving and it'd taken advantage of the chaos to push through. On veiled limbs it slipped through the last regulars of the front and through the screaming gap in the heavies. The Blade of Mercy swung his blade at it, glinting with Light and blindingly quick, but it cut only through translucent layers and the demon's body tumbled among the crossbowmen. One, two, three, four – seven orbs did I weave out of Night, detonating them in a perpetual circle I filled as soon as it broke so that the abomination would remain stuck, but tendrils shot out and the Night shattered again as Sve Noc fled the demonic taint. A thief's power, mine, not a soldier's, and now my legionaries were paying the price for it.

The creature, still screaming, struck out at still-whispering Masego but the Repentant Magister blew it back – in part, at least, for it had been expecting the blow and it merely spun about some as it was mostly translucence that was blown through. I spun Night into a vortex behind it, sucking it backwards, but with a bat of wings it stayed in place and the Repentant Magister was forced to blow back another reaching hand, screaming the same word of power in a ragged voice. The Blade of Mercy had swung round, slicing through a taken regular as he did, and now swung at the demon from the back but the thickening glare of Light ate away at my own working – the demon fell to the ground, a single long limb extending as it tore through the Repentant Magister's torso.

Nephele began to scream, face twisting in *utter terror* in a vision that would stay with me until I died, and the Blade of Mercy's strike faltered at the sound. The Light trembled, the demon was ripped back by the strengthening anew of the vortex I had not ended, and the limb unfolded into a dozen wings of translucent black that clawed to Antoine of Lange's sides as they were torn away. Was he... No. His armour, I thought, his armour would have been thick enough no blood was spilled.

"Dry rivers and sunder mountains," the Hierophant said, his calm voice cutting through the chaos like a blade. "Scatter chariots and snatch sunlight: I command that you will be *still*."

The demon froze. Immediately and utterly, as if it had been the decree of Creation itself.

"Now," I screamed through the screaming, "*now*, Antoine."

"*Burn*, you misbegotten thing," the Blade of Mercy hissed, and his blade shone bright once more as it went down.

It was blinding to look upon as it went through the Demon of Terror. The veils evaporated, the black flesh shivered and boiled and went up in smoke as the wrath of the Gods Above came down upon the abomination and eradicated it through their chosen champion. Like a sun at midday, the Light swallowed the hallway whole and chased away my Night. When it faded, there was nothing left of the demon but the aftermath. Screaming soldiers, who I knocked unconscious as gently as I could with spinning orbs, and one more yet. Nephele Eliade had slumped onto the ground and she was bleeding, but the red was turning darker. Soon, I thought, it would be as liquid smoke.

She bit her lip until it bled to swallow the scream, and unto me she turned a pleading gaze. I knew what it was she was asking.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, as I brought up my staff.

I made it quick, quick enough it'd be painless. It was the least I could do.

"Handle the contamination," I told Masego without turning.
"Please."

I felt him nod without turning and left him to it, as began the roar of flames and I closed my eyes. It was a weakness, but I would allow myself it. Just this once. I only wished that, even with eyes closed, the only thing I could see was not the look of grateful *relief* in Nephele Eliade's eyes as I killed her. I did not allow myself more than a few moments, though. Now was not the time for indulgence. Our losses had been... harsh. Not only was the Repentant Magister dead, but we'd also consigned to ash six of our ten heavies, two of our ten crossbowmen and eight regulars. Nearly half our company had died in its first engagement.

Against a demon, that couldn't even be said to be a bad roll of the dice.

Before the ashes grew cold we moved on, carefully stepping around the rivulets of contamination the demon had left coming there. It slowed our advance, but we were close to the part of the Repository where the Severance awaited now. The slight detour we allowed ourselves was taking the hall the Demon of Terror had not at a crossroads we stumbled upon, so that we wouldn't have to keep stepping around death and worse as we tried to hurry up. I was on edge the entire time, but it wasn't a demon we ended up

running into. It was a woman, with striking purple eyes and black hair pulled into a topknot. Not someone I knew from sight, but the Concocter had been described to be before and her appearance was unusual enough. It was what she was dragging behind her that had my heart rising up in my throat.

A makeshift litter with an orc on it.

It'd taken me a moment to recognize Hakram, for most of him was now a raw and bloody wound. With unnatural precision and severity his flesh had been cut, from his upper thigh to the side of his now visible ribs to the shoulder stump that'd been made of the same arm he'd once mangled for Vivienne. He looked more than half-dead, skin pale and wan as sweat covered his armour-stripped body. His wounds were not bleeding, I thought, but neither was he in any way *healed*.

"Gods Above," the Blade of Mercy whispered.

"Hierophant," I began, but Masego had already been moving.

He swept past the Concocter, whose face showed only relief at our arrival, and I was left to speak with her as Masego saw to our friend.

"He'll live?" I asked her, even though it was not the most pressing of matters.

"For an hour," the Concocter said. "If I get him to the Sinister Physician before that, he'll make it through."

I breathed out. At least there was that.

"Lieutenant Inger," I called out. "Our heavies are to help the Concocter carry the Lord Adjutant to the infirmary in the Knot."

"Ma'am," the orc soberly saluted, then set to passing along the orders.

"The Mirror Knight?" I asked the villainess.

"Doing his best to contain the mess," the Concocter grimaced. "When I left the Vagrant Spear was still alive, and she insisted on staying after taking a potion."

I nodded.

"How many demons?" I pressed.

"I couldn't tell," the Concocter admitted. "They got to the fae, it was..."

She shivered at the memory.

"I would not have stayed even if asked," the purple-eyed alchemist said. "We weren't pursued, so at least one of them should still be alive."

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them. Not necessarily promising, but better than nothing. It'd have to do.

"Anything you need to keep him alive," I said, forcing myself not to look at Hakram lest my voice shake, "you have it. Use my name if you have to."

She dipped her head in acknowledgement.

"Concocter," I said, voice going low. "I am in your debt for this. I will not forget it."

She watched me, eyes considering.

"Neither will I, Your Majesty," she said.

Masego came back to me even as the Concocter and her escort of four heavies – half of them carrying the litter – left.

"He was struck by a demon, though I cannot tell which sort," Hierophant told me. "The Severance was used to cut the flesh, presumably to halt the spread of the taint. He will survive if properly tended to but there will be no reattaching the limbs."

I breathed out. Hakram would live. Masego himself had told me, and I did not doubt his words. The rest we could deal with when horror had been thrown back into the hole from which it had crawled out. We pressed on, our company thinned even further, until we had reached the threshold of madness. What I had expected to be waiting for us was two Named on the edge of annihilation, or perhaps a desperately fighting Mirror Knight devoured by grief at the loss of his companion, but what we got was different.

As we approached what had been the resting place of the Severance, we stepped into a charnel yard.

The corpses closest to us were fae, or at least had been. Several of the bodies were in hacked pieces, some of them twisted by what I recognized to be the touch of Corruption, and even those of the fae that had died without first being swallowed by demonic taint were a grisly sight. Carved through from head to groin or across the torso, spilling red or half a dozen other things as their faces remained frozen in ugly rictuses of surprise or anger. My boots waded through blood as I advanced, but other things too – red leaves, grown that as much from autumn as death, stuck to the bottom of my boots. There were precious stones and broken wooden shafts, silks and shattered dreamlike armours. The might of the

Court of Autumn had come for the Mirror Knight, and he had *massacred* it.

Beyond those rested a thing that looked like a twisted afterbirth, hacked into and burned until it was no longer a threat. The remains of a demon, I thought as the lot of us walked through death. There was another, forced into a hole carved in the wall and both stone and corpse were scorched so thoroughly nothing could be glimpsed of the manner of demon it had been, Beyond it a few steps up led us to open steel gates and the last gasps of madness beyond. At the gates, where the Mirror Knight and the Vagrant Spear must have stood and fought, the blackened and scattered remains of another two demons could be seen. It was further in that the fighting still held, past the three stripes of burned flesh that had my heart stirring in unease to look at and the... hole that it hurt my mind to even think of. There I first found the Vagrant Spear, the Levantine heroine named Sidonia, ever barefoot and holding her tall spear as she let loose the occasional small burst of Light from it to prevent the last demon from *escaping*.

Christophe de Pavanie's face was calm, but his eyes hard. Armoured in polished silver plate from head to toe he was hard for the eye to follow – he was quick, quicker than a man in such heavy armour should be, and the mirror-like plate obscured his movements to even a careful eye. His shield was dazing to look at, a perfect reflection of all it beheld, but it was the sword in his hand that had my hair raising. Whistling softly as it cut through the air even when it did not move, the Severance sliced through a twisted shape of shifting mercury like it was butter. The demon screamed and tried to flee around the hero, but the Vagrant Spear drove it back with a burst of Light. One, twice, thrice did the Mirror Knight strike, his plate burning with radiance as the demon burned into molten remains from the glare of the reflection.

I no longer had to worry about madness swallowing whole the Arsenal, it seemed, which was a relief.

Less pleasing was the fresh peril that the day had brought to my door: if I fought the Mirror Knight, now, I believed I might just lose.

Chapter 25: Sanitize

"Though it is not poor advice that one should imitate excellence, one who follows this advice alone can only ever aspire to be an imitation of excellence."

– Extract from the treatise "On Rule", author unknown (widely believed to be Prince Bastien of Arans)

As the radiance in his armour slowly faded, the Mirror Knight turned towards us.

With the echoes of Light that'd shone within his plate dispersing, the aura of power that'd hung around him should have gone the same way – and it did, some. Christophe of Pavanie no longer seemed like an implacable thing fashioned out silver and light: he looked human again, the raised visor of his barbute revealing dark locks pressed by sweat against his brow. Yet I could see the certainty he was moving with now, that certain something that came from being in your element and knowing it, and grew no less wary of the man. The softly whistling sword in his hand he sheathed without a word, sliding it home in a beautiful and heavy piece of iron, but even his putting away the Saint of Sword's cutting rectitude made blade was not enough to have my shoulders loosen.

Losing the unearthly touch had simply left behind a man, I thought, with dark green eyes and narrow lips. Flawed, yes, but not unpleasantly so. It made him seem more attainable, the stark opposite of the Exiled Prince's golden perfection back in the day – which had been beautiful but also somehow unnatural to the eye. This one, though, he looked cloaked in might but no less *human* for it. It was a dangerous thing, that mix of vulnerability and power. I should know, given how often I'd used it to bind people to me. Soldiers were willing to pay dues to a faraway idol, but real loyalty came from sharing in blood and mud. Christophe de Pavanie, to speak the words that had my fingers clenching in dismay, looked like someone people might rally around.

That was dangerous, when the man being rallied to bore both a sword forged for deicide and a child's understanding of politics.

The Mirror Knight had carved his way through seven demons and half a Court's worth of fae in a single evening, so there was no arguing that the man had the might to back anything he chose to say. Much as my mind wanted to argue that providence and another lesser hand had provided in this, that the Severance and Light made him uniquely suited to demonslaying, I knew those whispers for what they were – a tinge of fear and dismay. Behind them was the knowledge that, right now, the one trick I had that might still be able to curb him was beyond my reach: now that the emergency wards had come on, I could no longer try to gate the hero to his demise. *The Saint could cut gates*, I thought. *So would it even be enough if I could still use them?*

"Black Queen," Christophe de Pavanie greeted me. "One of them slipped by ua, a dreadfiend. Did your party catch it?"

Only then did his eyes slide away from me and onto the rest of our company, ignoring the legionaries and barely paying attention to the mages before lingering on Masego and at last offering the Blade of Mercy a slight nod. Even that was enough to have the

younger man blooming in pleasure, whatever gilding having been knocked off the Mirror Knight today freshly plastered back on by this victory.

"It's been destroyed," I replied, voice even. "There were losses."

His face fell into dismay, the peace on it whisked away in a heartbeat.

"Lady Eliade?" he hoarsely asked.

"And sixteen of my soldiers," I replied, tone growing sharp.

I grieved Nephele's death, but power and a story had not somehow made her life worth more than those others.

"I did not mean to dismiss their deaths," he stiffly said.

I forced myself to breathe out. It'd been an unkind interpretation of his words, and I'd known it even as I spoke the words.

"My temper is not at its best," I replied, stopping short of an apology.

The Vagrant Spear, who I'd barely been paying attention to, began to pant noticeably as she suddenly went deathly pale. Earlier upright and dealing in Light, she now began to lean heavily against her spear – and even then she looked about to topple over.

"Sidonia," the Mirror Knight exclaimed, catching her elbow.

I stepped forward, though he had things seemingly in hand so I did not try to offer my own arm.

"Hierophant can provide healing, if you're willing," I offered as I kept limping forward.

Now that I was paying closer attention to her, the ironically eye-catching scorched eye was not the worst of what she'd gone through tonight. There were subtle tells of harsher wounds. For one the flush she'd had while fighting had not abated in the slightest since, and she was sweating badly enough it was making her face paint run. Some tells were less subtle, like blade marks including one puncture that would have gone through her lung by the angle. Nasty stuff, lung wounds, even for Named. Some slender blade had done it, but definitely a sword. The marks weren't bleeding, though, and even looked to be healed some: scabs had formed, though they looked bloody and crusty. The Concocter's work, no doubt.

"The second of the peddler's potions has run out," the Vagrant Spear admitted. "It was champion's brew, Black Queen, or close enough. There is little that the Hierophant can do. With a few days of rest, I should be on my feet again."

"Something can be done about the fever at least, surely," the Mirror Knight insisted.

"He's right," I said. "Consider it an order by an officer of the Truce and Terms. I might still have questions for you, so you can't disappear into sleep and avoid all the unpleasant work that'll come after this spectacular mess."

She let out a weak chuckle.

"As relentless a taskmistress as your reputation promised," the Vagrant Spear told me, though it almost sounded like a compliment.

Masego had come to stand by me, having already wrested away sorcery from a mage, and by the look on his face I suspected he would have healed Sidonia regardless of her answer. Zeze was not a foe to other people's pride, usually, but he did tend to draw the line at what he perceived to be willful stupidity.

"Close your eyes," Hierophant ordered, yellow light coming to wreath his fingers. "And if you feel muscles spasming, tell me immediately."

I heard him mutter *champion's brew* with a pronounced degree of distaste under his breath, then add something about calling poison what it was. I clenched my fingers and unclenched them, considering how I was now to deal with the Mirror Knight. From the corner of my eye I could see that the Blade of Mercy was hesitating to approach, likely afraid of interrupting a conversation between two people that were his social superiors, and in a snap decision I gestured for him to approach. It'd buy me a bit of time to think while they chatted, and I took the opportunity to send some regulars doubling back to get mages and priests here in all haste. I wanted every inch of this bloody place scoured clean until even layers of bedrock had gone.

Hells, if we could figure out a way how I was going to dump this entire section of the Arsenal out of here and then find a way to ensure not even a sliver of any kind of taint was able to crawl out of the destruction visited onto it.

I still had one loose end to clean up before I could pass supervision of this to competent officers and crash into a bed, though, and now I had to decide whether I wanted to take the Mirror Knight along with me when I saw to it. The man had no position under the Terms that'd warrant that, of course, and by treating him like he did I might be lending him that authority in

fact. If *I* acted like he was important, a lot of people would follow suit. That was the argument against it. The opposite side of this was that the Terms were an abstract, an ideal: in practice, power mattered. The Mirror Knight had the Severance, he was nigh-unkillable and was also a rather famous Proceran hero – arguably the most famous of them all. The Kingfisher Prince had spent most the war up in Twilight's Pass, after all.

It was indisputable that Christophe de Pavanie would end up with clout, after tonight, so shouldn't I begin to bring him into the... fold, for lack of a better term, as soon as possible? Even if it happened that he was intent on being an enemy, it'd be best to find out early. It felt like a mistake, but then it'd be just as much of one to go the other way wouldn't it? The Intercessor knew her way around a scheme: her works left me only shades of loss to pick from. From the corner of my eye I noticed the conversation between the two Proceran heroes had come to an end, which meant my delaying must come to an end.

"Mirror Knight," I called out.

I gestured for him to follow me when he glanced my way, stepping away from the closest soldiers for a degree of privacy. I hid a wince when he came close, as the last glints of Light in his armour unsettled the Night within my body – like wind on the surface of a pond. I could understand now why Firstborn would find him deeply unsettling, being so much more deeply dyed in the Night than I could ever hope to be. But it was the sword that had me wariest of all. Even sheathed, I could feel its hostility. *You know who I am*, I thought, sneaking a look at it. *And there's just enough of Laurence left in you to hold a grudge, isn't there?*

"Black Queen," Christophe de Pavanie said. "You wanted to talk?"

His eyes were wary, but he did not strike me as spoiling for a fight. I supposed even his stamina must run out eventually, or at least dip downwards.

"This isn't over yet," I said.

He slowly nodded.

"Antoine says you have fingered the culprit behind all this," he said. "The Wandering Bard, yes? More fearsome an enemy than her Name would have one believe."

"The Bard can't act directly," I bluntly said. "Think of her as a devil or a fae: her weapons are deals and persuasion, not blades. And she had helpers in the Arsenal from the start."

The Mirror Knight's face went cold.

"Traitors," he spat. "That will need seeing to."

"Most are dead, outed by their actions during the crisis," I said. "But there is one still unaccounted for – the person who unleashed the Concocter's creations in the Miscellaneous Stacks, likely the same collaborator who tried to arrange for the Kingfisher Prince to fight guards."

"Then we are still in danger," the Mirror Knight said, side of the neck twitching as he forced himself not to look to the side.

Where Masego was seeing to wounded Vagrant Spear. Wasn't the danger to himself that was worrying him, evidently. I was going to have to look into that relationship, wasn't I? Gossip about Named tended to be a lot more useful than you'd think in figuring them out, at least when it was halfway credible.

"I don't believe the individual in question to be a current threat," I noted. "But neither do I believe in letting loose ends linger."

Dark green eyes narrowed.

"You've been vague on purpose about the traitor," the Mirror Knight said. "Are you afraid I'll take justice in my own hands?"

That edged on a challenge, and it had my blood quickening. My instinct was to slap him down, to set a tone for the coming days that established very clearly where we stood in the pecking order, but that was a *risk*. I'd be antagonizing a useful resource and, to be blunt, if the challenge turned to a fight the consequences of a defeat here would be disastrous. I must walk a fine line, remaining convivial without bending my neck – weakness would invite pursuit, not restraint.

"You barely know the third of what went on in the Arsenal this night," I flatly replied. "Justice is not something you're even remotely in a position to provide."

His lip curled in displeasure, but there was nothing there he could argue with.

"You could, however," I continued in a calm voice, "assist me in my duties under the Terms as witness for your side. Something I brought you aside to invite you to do."

"If there is still a traitor, this fight has not ended," Christophe of Pavanie insisted.

"This is not a battle, it is a disciplinary matter," I said. "If there are sentences to be doled out, then that will be done by the high officers of the Truce and Terms – and after discussion and trial, not by dragging people to the nearest hanging tree."

Too confrontational, I chided myself, but then what choice did I have? I could not let him believe, not even for a moment, that he had the right or authority to pass judgement over other Named. That'd be the end of the Truce and Terms, an implicit admission that its rules would always favour the side with the biggest stick. Without the perception of fairness, they were nothing but ink and air.

"I do not speak of summary executions, Black Queen," the Mirror Knight said, sounding appalled.

"Then we have no issue," I said. "Will you be accompanying me, or will I be reaching out to another Chosen?"

That particular trick I'd learned Akua. The false dilemma was an older lesson, but the little deceit of refraining from specifying something – which hero I would be reaching out to, in this case – while letting the wording do the thinking for the interlocutor. Chosen, I'd said, and there was only one other Proceran hero. The Mirror Knight's eyes flicked to the Blade of Mercy. Young, exhausted, more than a little shaken by his brush with a demon. And the older man would see the younger as in his charge, too, not exactly a subordinate but at least a responsibility. The question had decided its own answer.

"I accept your invitation to ser- *stand* as witness," the Mirror Knight said, hastily changing the sentence halfway through.

"Good," I said. "See to your affairs here, then prepare yourself to leave. We'll be going as soon as enough mages and priests have arrived to contain this properly."

The man nodded and briskly walked away. Fair enough. I checked in on Masego, to see how the healing was doing, but was shooed away. I did manage to slide in that I wanted him to lead containment and purge protocols here, which he agreed to without missing a beat. Our reinforcements were there before long, first a few careful squads of lightly armoured Dominion warriors sneaking in to have a look and then proper companies. Mages and priests aplenty, led by the Harrowed Witch and an earnest-faced man in armour who introduced himself as the Forlorn Paladin. Right, the hero with amnesia – one of Indrani's band. Much as their presence was appreciated, it was an old Lycaonese captain I left in charge, with a note that he should follow the recommendation of the specialists regarding containment to the letter.

With that left in good hands and the Mirror Knight having made his goodbyes to the Vagrant Spear and the Blade of Mercy, the two of us left. No escort came with us, though Lieutenant Inger offered, as I did not want to spook our target too soon. The downside of that was that I was left alone with Christophe de Pavanie, who for some godforsaken reason took it upon himself to attempt stilted small talk.

"I heard that you dealt handily with the undead plague in southern Hainaut," the Mirror Knight said.

I eyed him sideways, and seriously debated simply telling him he didn't have to do this. Good odds he'd taken as an insult, though, so I supposed we were fated to suffer through this.

"Would that we could have prevented that instead of suppressed it," I said, then made effort of my own. "I heard through the White Knight that you were part of the band that sunk a turtle-ship near Cleves – a well-done thing."

I bit my tongue a heartbeat later when I recalled what Hanno had told me of *how* that'd been achieved: throwing the man to my side through the shell, like some sort of eldritch trebuchet stone. His cheeks reddened and his hand slipped towards the Severance. Not to grasp its handle or threaten to unsheathe it, I thought, but... cautiously. Disbelievingly. As if to reassure himself it was there. Fuck, that might actually be worse. There were ways to handle a swaggering bully with a new toy, but this looked like a deeper thing.

"It was necessary work," the Mirror Knight said, tone steady. "Perhaps we might discuss where we are headed, and to meet whom?"

Yeah, I wasn't going to look that particular gift horse in the mouth.

"This is one of the paths to the Workshop," I said. "And we're headed towards the persona quarters of the Hunted Magician."

The dark-haired man jolted in surprise.

"One of the Damned?" he said. "I had thought..."

Wait, this entire time had he thought that I was trying to off one of the heroes and using him as a witness and helper? Had that been why he was so appalled when I mentioned hanging? Neither of those questions were something I could really ask outright, so I swallowed them and pressed on.

"My proof of his dealings with the Wandering Bard is weak," I said, "but I have enough that I should be able to startle more out of him. Besides, his troubles with Autumn came back to haunt all of us."

"He has given an oath to the Fair Folk?" the Mirror Knight asked.

"He never paid the debt," I corrected. "And Autumn came here in part to collect."

"Then every life taken by the fae is on his head," Christophe de Pavanie coldly said.

I shook my head.

"He didn't invite them, and as far as I know his enmity with them is older than his signing onto the Truce and Terms," I said. "Quite a few Named have old enemies that'd take a swing at them if they could, that's not a crime."

"Corpses strewn across the Arsenal speak otherwise," the Mirror Knight said.

"He was a tool in that, not the culprit," I flatly said.

That, to my surprise, actually seemed to strike a chord.

"But he is a traitor still," the Proceran hero said.

"*That*," I muttered, "I won't argue with."

And I suspected I already knew exactly what the Intercessor had bought his cooperation with, which while understandable did not make me want to burn him at the stake any less. When we actually got to the Workshop I had to ask for directions, since I didn't know where his quarters were, but the Arsenal was crawling with soldiers now so it was easily done. I shot a look at the Mirror Knight when we got to the door, waiting for his nod, and only then knocked. Before it opened I already knew he'd be behind it: the buzz of sorcery against my fingers, the telltale mark of something being warded up to its neck, assured me as much. He'd clearly made his rooms into a place where it would exceedingly difficult for enemies to find him.

The door was cracked open, the Hunted Magician carefully peering through. His eyes widened when he saw me, but he mastered his surprise and opened the door wide. Only then did he notice Christophe de Pavanie looming tall at my side, and the mask of affability he'd halfway put on lapsed into blankness. Whatever he'd believed me to be here for, the Mirror Knight being along did not fit with that belief. I used my staff to gently but firmly finish pushing open the door.

"Hunted Magician," I mildly said. "You know the Mirror Knight, I take it?"

"I know of him, Your Majesty," the Proceran mage said, inclining his head in a silent greeting. "What bring me the pleasure of your companies, if I might ask?"

"Not the sort of conversation to have in a hallway, yes?" I smiled.

"It would only be decent to offer seating and refreshments," the Mirror Knight pointedly said.

The look of pure genuine dislike they traded after that allowed me to take a look inside while they were both busy. Classic Alamans tastes, all cushions and painted wood with the furniture alone being worth as much as some houses back in Laure. We didn't pay the man nearly enough for that, but there was no telling what wealth he'd squirrelled away or favours he'd called in since.

"Alas, I only have one set of cups fit to witness royal lips," the Hunted Magician said. "I'm afraid you will have to some servant set I have lying around, Knight."

"Your hospitality matches your reputation," the Mirror Knight replied without missing a beat.

Point went to Christophe for that round, I decided.

"Oh, we won't be here for long," I said, still smiling. "I only mean to put some misunderstandings to rest, then we'll be off."

The Proceran villain glanced at the hero, brow quirking.

"I can just imagine," he thinly smiled, "what manner of misunderstanding you mean."

The Mirror Knight shot me a burning look, but if he hadn't wanted me to use his being an ass to my purposes then he shouldn't have been in the first place. We were invited to sit, myself on a seat like the Hunted Magician himself while Christophe was made to stay on a padded red footstool by my side.

"You are aware of the troubles that struck the Arsenal, of course?" I asked.

"Indeed," the Hunted Magician said. "I fought in defence of the Workshop, but found myself alone and so withdrew in the face of the enemy. I did return to help with healing at the Sinister Physician's infirmary when the immediate peril had passed, though I returned when I grew tired and my services superfluous."

He probably *had* done all those things, I mused. He seemed like the thorough type in some ways, so there'd likely be witnesses and everything. Unfortunately for him, I wasn't *digging* at the truth – I already had it. What I wanted from him was an admission.

"I did not see you at the Workshop when I fought there," the Mirror Knight accusingly said.

"There's more than one room in it, as it happens," the Hunted Magician drily replied.

"You're familiar with fae," I said. "What's your take on their presence here?"

"I see," he mused. "As you've grown to suspect, Your Majesty, our foe must have used my past dealings with their kind to muster them against the Arsenal – though I was not hunted for long, and so their true reason to have come here must be a deeper game."

Halfway believable, I thought, but still a little weak. He had to know that, so odds were he was counting on mere suspicion not being enough considering how useful he was to the Grand Alliance as an artificer and enchanter. In most circumstances that would have been a correct read of the situation, to his credit. These were not circumstances, and it was not just anyone he'd bargained with.

"That was also my conclusion," I mildly said. "And who would you name our foe?"

"It must be the Dead King," the Hunted Magician gravely assured me.

I drummed my fingers against the side of my staff, thoughtfully.

"Let's try this again," I said. "But with you being aware that I slit the Wandering Bard's throat after extracting every secret I could from her, including her multiple collaborators within these walls."

The man paled, grey-blue eyes dilating with fear.

"I understand that questions must be asked, Your Majesty, but I have never dealt with a foe of the Grand Alliance," he assured me, voice impressively calm.

"Liar," the Mirror Knight coldly said. "You stink of it."

"Do be silent, *péquenaud*," the Hunted Magician snarled. "I must protest at the presence of one of the hounds of the Heavens, Your Majesty, this is most-"

I sighed and slowly I reached for the long dragonbone pipe within my cloak. The eyes of the two of them on me as I slowly opened a packet of wakeleaf – Hanno's gift, amusingly – and stuffed it before passing my palm over the bowl and letting a flare of back flame light it. I breathed in deep, then leaned back into my seat and crossed one of my legs over the other. I breathed out the smoke slowly, letting it curl up around my face.

"Your Majesty," the Hunted Magician tried again. "If I may-"

"Who am I, Magician?" I patiently asked him.

"The Black Queen, as all know," the man replied. "I question not your authority under the Truce and Terms-"

"No," I said. "You just take me for a fool. Now that with the Bard's help you were able to have the prince holding your debt killed, you think you can wiggle your way out of this without too much trouble."

"I have never heard of this woman you accuse me of having made common cause with," the Hunted Magician said, exasperated.

"It must have seemed like a sweet bargain," I mused. "Open a few canisters of gas, weave an illusion or two, and just like that the great sword ever hanging over your head would go away forever. Hardly even a breach of the Terms, even if you got caught. There are others under this roof who have done the same or worse."

I breathed in the smoke. The Mirror Knight was watching me in silence, visibly eager to speak but forcing himself to remain silent anyway.

"I brought worthy concerns to you, Your Majesty," the man said. "Why would I do such a thing, were I a traitor?"

I breathed out the smoke, then leaned forward.

"Right now," I said, "the only thing standing between you and a tribunal of heroes, of angry Grand Alliance officers? It's my word, Magician. So I want you to take a moment to consider, *really consider*, exactly how much of an imposition on my patience you want to be after the night I've had."

The Hunted Magician fell silent.

"This was a bad bargain," I told him, tone cool and calculating. "I don't even need to lift a finger to destroy you, after this: all I need to do is stop extending my protection and they'll have you gagged and chained before the hour's out. And even if you escape, where do you go? We're half the continent, Magician, you'll be hunted like a criminal everywhere we rule. Even in the League we're owed favours, and if you somehow make it to Praes the best you can hope for is a gilded cage – though more likely they'll use you, then murder you so you cannot be used by another. You traded one faraway fairy prince as an enemy for the lasting anger of *half fucking Calernia*."

"This is coercion," the Hunted Magician tightly said. "Is that not an abuse of your authority, Black Queen?"

I spewed out a long stream of smoke.

"Authority," I repeated, amused. "Are you going to begin listening to me, then? The word goes both ways. You cannot hide under my wing and sink a knife in my flank at the same time – I am not so tolerant a soul as to allow *that*."

His appeal to my better nature – which had always been pragmatic enough to know when it was time to go for a walk and let the other one handle things – having failed, he turned to the other way out of this mess.

“What do you want?” the dark-haired mage asked, teeth gritted.

“I want a reason I should go through the effort to keep your head off a pike,” I said. “Because the more you keep wasting my time, Hunted Magician, the more I begin to consider how putting it there instead would solve *so very many* of my problems.”

The enthusiasm I’d spoken that last sentence with, I thought, was what tipped him over the edge.

“I know you can extract memories with Night,” he suddenly said. “So I can give you the Bard.”

“I have the Bard already,” I said, unimpressed. “Try harder.”

“I know how the Blessed Artificer and the Repentant Magister were tipped off to the existence of Quartered Seasons, and by whom,” the Hunted Magician said.

My pulse slowed. I wanted that. Most the traitors of this night had come from outside the Arsenal, and that meant the Intercessor was likely to still have helpers out there. A way to begin ripping out her influence root and stem was a decent prize to bargain with. Not, though, quite enough to tempt me.

“Better,” I said. “But sweeten the pot a little more.”

First he looked insulted by the cavalier treatment, then hesitant. He licked his lips.

“I know,” the Hunted Magician slowly said, “where to find the ruling crown of Autumn.”

I breathed in smoke so that a triumphant grin would not reveal the truth of my thoughts. And like that, the pieces fell together. If Hierophant could get his hands on it, Quartered Seasons became more than an idle notion.

“That will do,” I said.

The Hunted Magician’s relief was not as well-hidden as he probably believed it to be. I rose to my feet, brushing some ash off my cloak.

“Don’t try to leave the Arsenal,” I said, not bothering to add on a threat. “I’ll send for you when the situation calms, likely with the White Knight and other Alliance representatives sitting in.”

"As you say," the Hunted Magician said through gritted teeth.

I glanced at the Mirror Knight and saw the face of a man who was moments away from blurting out a great many opinions.

"Escort me back to my rooms, please," I said.

Christophe de Pavanie stiffly nodded, and even opened the door for me.

I suspected the conversation that was about to follow, though, would be a great deal less civil.

Chapter 26: Palaver

"Hold not even the least of the laws of men in contempt, for where their like is absent rule only the laws of beasts."

– Isocrates the Harsh, Atalante preacher

I'd learned over the years that there were a lot of unspoken rules in Alamans culture.

Many them seemed about social status at first glance, in a way that made every mudfoot Callowan hackle in my body rise, but I'd eventually been forced to admit it was a little more nuanced than that. The Alamans were the most populous of the three Proceran peoples – Vivienne believed that there might be as many as three times more of them than Lycaonese – and I suspected a lot of their culture had been shaped of need to keep that massive amount of people at least halfway orderly. The Ebb and Flow might be a vicious wastrel thing by anyone's standards but the Wasteland's, but not every custom should be painted with the same brush. As an example; the typical Alamans reluctance to ever contradict a social superior in public wasn't from their ways being more set in stone when it came to the aristocracy, but arguably from the *opposite*.

Proceran royalty worried a lot more about public opinion than I'd ever believed such a rapacious lot would, because to them it could be a lethal thing. The Alamans understanding of authority was fundamentally rooted in a ruler having the graces of the Heavens of the people, so losing either tended to have an ambitious sibling or cousin remove you for the good of the family – when it wasn't done by another noble family entirely, one which had recently proven competent and popular. That sort of thing was exceedingly rare, in Callow. Back home when rule of holdings passed to another house it was usually because the last one had died to battle or Praesi madness, or the sparse cases where the Albans and Fairfaxes had stripped a house of its titles for some manner of treason. And that last one was *darned* rare, since some houses had flown the rebel banner and even fought battles against

the Fairfaxes while still retaining their titles after their loss.

I'd found it fascinating that while back home it was broadly assumed that Proceran peasants were starvelings constantly robbed by their princes, the common folk of Procer in truth had their rights guaranteed by law: a set of rights known as 'Salienta's Graces', which royals naturally tried to squeeze around but were very leery of outright breaking. The sole lawful check on noble abuses, in Callow, was the crown being petitioned for intervention. Sure, it was an open secret that if some baron began to trouble their people too much they were likely to one day not return from a hunt or mysteriously choke on their supper, but if violence was the only way to end a crime then there was a weakness in the law. It'd been humbling to realize some of the last remaining Callowan nobles might get outright rebellious if I tried to cram down their throats the legal rights for the commons that Proceran folk took for *granted*.

Not because they intended to abuse their subjects, no, but simply because the crown would be weakening their authority. Right or wrong didn't enter the equation, just the balance of power, and that was a hard thing to swallow even for me – whose opinion of Callowan nobles had long been, one might say, *uncharitable*. It'd also made me reconsider a lot of the conversations I'd had with Cordelia Hasenbach over the years, approaching them with fresh eyes. Her threshold for losing power in Procer had never been outright rebellion, as it could be argued to be for me, but simply growing unpopular enough that there would not be much trouble if someone of good reputation toppled her through the Highest Assembly. Hells, hadn't people tried to overthrow her with only middling backing just because it seemed like her decisions were getting unpopular? A lot of what had seemed to be hemming and hawing for its own sake back then could now be understood differently, if not necessarily be more forgivable for it.

It'd been almost as fascinating to me that lowborn Procerans tended to cling to those unspoken rules even more tightly than the nobles, as if deviating from them would be taint on their character. Christophe of Pavanie was, from what little the Jacks had been able to dig up on him – genuinely obscure origins had, there, been an even finer shield than an empire's worth of spies – of middling but not outright lowborn birth. His family would have been from the equivalent of a town's eldersmen, in Callowan terms, but not necessarily influential or all that wealthy. Comfortable enough to ensure he'd be able to read and write, though, and evidently have some tutoring in the etiquette of the *well-bred*. Which was why the Mirror Knight had not spoken a single word about the conversation I'd had with the Hunted Magician, even though he was very clearly itching to.

I was a queen, you see, and a duly recognized high officer of the Grand Alliance. If I wasn't going around breaking the Truce and Terms myself, making myself into an outlaw and so throwing away all privileges, he might hate it to the bone but he'd not deny that I was his social superior. Mind you, that would only hold so long as we were out in public. And considering we'd long left behind the Workshop and entered the Alcazar, the thin barrier that'd ensured his sullen silence as we walked was soon to be stripped away. My first instinct had been to bring him to the small room where I'd received him earlier, but since it was currently filled with a mess of cards and the Wandering Bard's latest corpse I'd naturally reconsidered. There was a small private parlour in my quarters here where we ought to be able to talk, though, and it'd do just fine.

The protective working of Night I'd laid on my door had dispersed when I'd been stabbed by the Fallen Monk earlier, so all it took to open my rooms was the use of a key. I gestured for the Mirror Knight to follow me in then closed the door behind us.

"Do you drink?" I asked, unclasping my cloak.

The man looked taken aback by the question, standing awkwardly in his full plate as I tossed the Mantle of Woe atop a dresser. I could hardly mock him for that, since if I'd been wearing proper armour instead of ceremonial dress I wouldn't have gotten stabbed in the neck by the Monk. Black's insistence on wearing plate seemingly at all times had never seemed more justified.

"Er, yes," the Mirror Knight said. "Your Majesty."

"Good," I grunted. "Do take you helmet off, and stash that sword somewhere I don't have to watch it seethe at my continued existence. I'm not going to stab you in my own parlour, I assure you."

His eyes widened.

"I did not mean to imply faithlessness of you by keeping my arms," the man hastily assured me, sounding like he very much wanted to wince.

He left the Severance near the door, propping it up against the wall like it was some farmer's hoe instead of tool for decide, and after looking around for somewhere to place his helm and failing he simply held it in the crook of his elbow.

Uncomfortably, one assumed. Meanwhile I unearthed what looked like some Proceran bottle of red from an overly fancy drink cabinet before liberating two crystal cups – a donation, I hoped, since the thought of Callowan coin going into paying for those had me more than a little displeased – and setting all three of those things on the table.

"That ought to do," I said, and flicked a glance at the helm.
"Put that on a dresser, would you?"

Amusing as it might be to watch him try to juggle holding his war helm and drink at the same time, it'd bode ill to make sport of him before our conversation even began. I uncorked the bottle with a pop and had moved to pour when I caught sight of the appalled look on the hero's face from the corner of my eye. Ah, yes. I was of higher rank, so pouring was either a breach of etiquette or implied a nonexistent degree of intimacy between us. Smothering a sigh – it'd be hypocritical to benefit from useful Alamans ways then complain of their inconvenience in the same breath – I flipped my grip and offered the bottle to him. With surprising deftness for a man still wearing gauntlets, he poured first for me and then for himself. I nodded thanks and sat, while he followed suit in the latter a heartbeat later.

"You have questions," I said.

Safer to frame them as that than objections. Someone confused could ask for clarifications without it being a threat, but to *object* implied a degree of authority I had no intention of allowing him in this conversation. The Mirror Knight's lips thinned.

"You as good as solicited a bribe from the Hunted Magician and threatened to purposefully fail your responsibilities to him if one was not offered," Christophe de Pavanie flatly accused.
"Worse, when that bribe was offered you *took* it."

I hummed.

"If I had simply asked questions of the Hunted Magician," I said, "what would have happened?"

"He would have lied," the Mirror Knight curtly said. "But you would not have disgraced yourself and the office you hold. He should have been imprisoned until a truthteller could be brought to the Arsenal."

I wasn't sure whether it was basic grounding in reality or a belief in the general perfidy of villains that had him aware that the Magician had no real reason to tell the truth if pressed, but I could work with it either way.

"Assume I had done this," I allowed, to his visible surprise.
"What would have followed?"

"A truthteller-"

"Who?" I pressed.

"The Peregrine," he said, "or perhaps the Exalted Poet."

"The Poet was a traitor who openly sided with the fae in battle," I noted.

And thank you a hundred times over, Indrani, for passing that piece along. The dark-haired man's face went slack in utter surprise. They'd fought on the same front, as I recalled. They must have known each other. I would have a lot more sympathy for his dismay if that friendship might not have led to the Bard getting her picked truthteller in a key position, had this all happened differently.

"I – are you quite certain?" the Mirror Knight croaked out.

"It has been confirmed by multiple witnesses," I said. "And that is not the heart of the issue, regardless: every single truthteller in the Grand Alliance is a *hero*."

"I do not see the issue," he replied, sounding entirely honest.

Because that just wasn't how he saw the world in the end, was it? Heroes – the Chosen – were honourable and good, so even us wicked Damned must recognize these qualities and believe in their word when it was given. It was a shade of the same sentiment I'd so deeply despised in Tariq, that bedrock assumption that only the mad and the lost could ever choose anything but service to the Gods Above. It was a way to see the world that simply did not allow for disagreeing equals.

"The word of heroes isn't trusted by the Named I have in my charge," I bluntly said. "Most of them have fought Chosen at some point in their lives-"

"It is not a crime to have *stopped* crime," Christophe burst out.

"No, but it is ridiculous to ask villains to believe in the impartiality of heroes when they've almost certainly fought with one of their friends or companions in the past," I patiently said. "You yourself came into the Arsenal all but accusing me of plotting to murder the Red Axe-"

"For which I apologize," the Mirror Knight said through gritted teeth. "I was given reason to believe such a plot was afoot."

"And you believed it," I said.

He began to apologize again but I raised my hand to stop him.

"I'm not here to rake you over the coals for that," I said. "Mind you, I'll want to know *why* you came to believe that, but my point is that you did believe it. Because there is no trust between us."

I paused to let him digest that, taking up my cup at sipping at it. Some strong-flavoured red. From where in Procer I had no idea, but it was pleasant enough to drink.

"You are saying," the Mirror Knight slowly said, "that the lack of trust goes both ways."

I'd led him to that, true enough, but that he'd gotten there at all meant he was likely someone I could deal with. Not like the Saint, whose principles had cut both ways and never bent an inch even when they led her to facing death standing all alone. Ignorance I could mend, zealotry I could not.

"At best, using heroes to settle villain affairs would be seen as weakness on my part," I bluntly said. "At worse, it would be seen as collusion and plot."

"Whether that is true or not," Christophe said, "it remains that you threatened the Hunted Magian with withholding the protections he is due by law."

"Is he?" I said. "He plotted with the Wandering Bard to help an assault into the Arsenal – this is fact, not supposition, even though my proofs are limited. I would have been well within my rights to cut him loose and offer him up in chains to stand before a military tribunal."

"Then it is even worse," the Mirror Knight said, "for that was your duty, and you laid it aside for a *bribe*."

I rolled my eyes.

"I laid nothing aside," I said. "He'll still stand trial as he should under the Truce and Terms and I have received nothing from him save for words."

"Just because the bribe was not delivered-"

"I asked him for reasons his coming tribunal might have to refrain from a brisk hanging being the sum whole of the judgement rendered," I sharply said, growing irritated with the constant accusation of bribery. "Not for any sort of *bribe*."

I'd bloodied my hands enough for three villains, but the accusation that I might be corrupt was still enough to infuriate me. I was a cheat and a killer, but I was not godsdamned crook.

"You were promised a fairy crown," the Mirror Knight unflinchingly replied. "That did not escape me, Black Queen. The purported scheme that brought me here was your attempted seeking of queenship over Named, and this eager pursuit of Autumn's regalia does nothing to abate my fears."

I breathed out, gathered my calm.

"I don't care," I bluntly said.

He blinked in surprise.

"That entire project is being kept secret for a reason, and it's been approved by people a lot more important than you," I said. "If the White Knight wants to bring you into the circle of those aware of its nature I'll consider agreeing to it, since you've already stumbled onto the outskirts, but ultimately that's not my decision to make."

That was the pivot, I thought. I was asserting that I had little direct authority over him, which should please him, but it came with the added implication that he was still subordinate to Hanno. Those were the lines drawn by rules and agreement, though, not something immutable. If he decided to push anyway this was going to be trouble.

"Then there should be no trouble with the Hunted Magician being placed under guard until the White Knight can speak of this matter for the Chosen," the Mirror Knight said.

It wasn't an unreasonable thing to ask, when it came down to it, and in principle I had nothing to lose by agreeing to it. In principle. Practically speaking, I'd be admitting that Christophe de Pavanie was someone who had a right to ask things of me. If I gave in now, would it just invite him to push for more? On the other hand, digging my heels in over even the slightest bump in the road was a good way to ensure this went to the Hells in a handbasket. I'd have to take the risk, then, and maybe phrase it so that I wasn't actually making a concession.

"I'll consider him to be the subject of a complaint under the Terms, then," I said. "The Rogue Sorcerer can see to it that no unseemliness happens when he's freed from other duties."

Roland was not the most trusted of heroes, he was too close to me for that, but he wasn't outright distrusted by his fellows either. He'd serve as an acceptable compromise candidate since I sure as hells wasn't putting the Blade of Mercy in charge of anything – much less guarding an experienced villain. I'd even managed to make this happen within the appearance of lawfulness, keeping to the Terms. But it was an illusion, I knew that all too well. Pick at the gold on any crown for long enough and you always found the steel that'd put the gilding on.

It was not a pleasant thing to be the side with the gilding instead of the steel, for once.

"That would be acceptable," the Mirror Knight said, and my fingers clenched.

I drank from my cup to hide my sudden urge to break his nose. *Acceptable*. Like he was doing me a favour by deigning to accept. The Magician was one of Below's, there was precisely no fucking part of this that Above's crowd had a right to dictate to me over. I breathed out, slowly, and forced calm. I glanced at the green-eyed man, finding him looking faintly embarrassed. Not because of me, I decided, I was not so easy to read these days.

"You look like you want to say something," I said.

"I yet remain in the dark about much of what went on during the attack," the Mirror Knight admitted. "And it occurs to me I am unlikely to find anyone more apt to tell the tale."

I hummed. After that little sentence I was less than inclined to indulge him in anything, but that he was asking at all implied a degree of trust in my word: there was no point in asking an explanation from someone you believed a liar. That belief was worth encouraging, I decided after a moment.

"To my understanding, the Wandering Bard's plot began with the Wicked Enchanter and the Red Axe," I said.

"Someone passed as the latter in Revenant form, when attacking the Stacks," Christophe said.

I watched his eyes tighten, his fingers clench, and remembered the few barbs I'd thrown his way when disguised as the Wicked Enchanter's corpse. Evidently, they'd stung deeper than I'd believed they would. I could confess to that deception, with or without revealing Indrani had been my companion, but to be frank I saw no real need to. There'd been enough chaos going around the Arsenal that it should comfortably remain a mystery, and even if it were suddenly revealed down the line by a twist of circumstance there was nothing all that damaging to reveal in the first place. Arson and skirmishing were not laudable behaviour, but given the circumstances I doubted my word would be gainsaid if I stated it'd been necessary.

"So I've heard," I said. "The object of the plot was to arrange a deep enmity between a heroine and villain, then ensure that they met where many other Named could see the violence that'd ensue."

"An attack on the Truce and Terms," the Mirror Knight nodded. "Clever, given that Damned were certain to ask for her head no matter how justified her actions were."

I wasn't going to touch that, considering how ambivalent I was feeling at having to pass down sanctions on behalf of an animal like the Wicked Enchanter. Safer to move on, I decided.

"From there, the Arsenal would become a dry bale of hay awaiting a match," I said. "The Blessed Artificer and the Repentant

Magister were made privy to incomplete but dangerous information about a restricted project, while you and your fellows were summoned to fight a false plot that would still have been weeks away from existing at all when word was sent."

There I paused in significant silence, inviting him to elaborate on that. Just because I was sharing information didn't mean I wasn't going to try to learn any. The Mirror Knight frowned.

"It was a letter," he admitted. "From one of my friends within these walls, though when I arrived and sought her out she told me she had sent no such thing."

"And that friend's name?" I asked.

"You would know her as the Bitter Blacksmith," he said. "She passed through Cleves on her way to the Arsenal, and the friendship we struck then remains."

His friend had been sleeping with the Hunted Magician for some time, I immediately thought, which meant he might have been the one to send that false letter using his access to her quarters. Although that hardly fit when I considered it more deeply: the Magician's relationship with the Intercessor had been transactional, and he was unlikely to have taken a risk like leaving a parchment trail on her behalf. *Especially not a letter coming out of the Arsenal, where everything is read through before it's allowed to leave.* No, most likely he or another of the Bard's helpers had gotten their hands on some writing of the Bitter Blacksmith's before passing it on. Another traitor would have then forged the letter outside the Arsenal and sent it to the Mirror Knight. Considering that the Concocter had ties with the smuggling ring of this place and bargained with the Bard as well, she seemed a more likely suspect there.

I'd still ask the Grey Pilgrim to confirm the Bitter Blacksmith's words if he could, just in case.

"A forgery," I said. "One that ensured you would come here and act aggressively."

His face soured but he did not argue with my words.

"I suspect we were meant to be at each other's throats," I said, delicately skipping over the part where we actually had been. "So that when the Court of Autumn struck we would be divided and unready."

Back in the Stacks, the Mirror Knight had varied wildly between tales when addressing my impersonation of a Revenant. I'd dismissed that as stupidity, back then, but in retrospect a more charitable interpretation might have been that he'd been utterly confused as to *why* he was there at all. It wasn't anyone's

natural leaning, not even mine, to begin by entertaining the notion that you'd been brought in because you were bound to fuck things up somehow. It made sense he would have been grasping at straw instead, desperately trying to figure what was going on around him. Yet the Intercessor had known exactly what she was doing, on the other hand: he'd been picked as much for his... inflexibility as for his potential to take up the Severance. A danger in both the short term and the long one. Gods but I hated fighting the Bard. Even when you won you lost.

At least we'd made it through better than she must have anticipated, my little trick of going directly to the Doddering Sage forcing her to use the Hunted Magician early – which ultimately came back to bite her, since it was one of the things that allowed me to figure out he'd been working with her – and the stroke of inspiration that was sending in Adjutant leading the Mirror Knight straight to my door later, no longer seeing me as an immediate foe. The memory of Hakram's body on that stretcher came back and I gritted my teeth. Inspiration had its costs. Yet when the fae had hit the Arsenal, they'd not fallen upon a pack of twitchy Named ready to blame each other but instead faced a few separate bands of five hunting down the Bard's schemes. What should have been a hard blow instead became a distraction, which I was honestly rather pleased about. If it'd really gone to shit in the Arsenal, the fae likely would have been able to make straight runs for the sword and Quartered Seasons and broken both.

"The fae went for both the Severance and the Hierophant's research, both of which represent a potential way of killing the Dead King," I said.

"But *why*?" the Mirror Knight quietly asked. "Why would anyone, even one of the Damned, try to doom Calernia to an eternity of undeath?"

"The Bard's been pulling strings for a long time, using a lot of different faces," I said. "She led the First Prince by the nose towards the creation of a weapon that might kill the Hidden Horror as well – the corpse of an angel of Judgement – but it has since been gleaned that the use of the weapon might have catastrophic consequences for all of Calernia. The idea of using it was laid aside, for now, but if Cordelia Hasenbach is stripped of every other option and annihilation comes to call..."

"Then the First Prince will do as she must, and sacrifice many to save the rest," the Mirror Knight said, sounding admiring. "How like the Damned, to attempt to make use of virtue as a flaw."

I didn't mention that, according to the Dead King's parting words in Salia, when the Painted Knife arrived we'd be learning the exact magnitude of the mess that would have ensued from Cordelia pulling that trigger. I suspected it was... not negligible, which

might go some way in explaining why the Intercessor had struck now of all times. With her secrets about to come out, she urgently needed to cut down on the Grand Alliance's options or there would be absolutely no reason for the First Prince to even consider using the Bard's preferred path. It also explained why this had been rather open engagement, by the Intercessor's standards: if that secret being revealed would burn all the bridges that were currently aflame, she was not losing much in a longer sense. And while trying to shape my Name might have been one of her reasons for coming out, I very much doubted it was the only one: it wasn't the Intercessor's way to get only one bird per stone.

"We fought better than the Bard expected," I said, which was not exactly true but not exactly false, "so she had to tip her hand further. Her traitors within the Arsenal took action – the Hunted Magician, the Exalted Poet, the Maddened Keeper-"

Christophe's brow rose.

"Was this Maddened Keeper the one responsible for the demons?" he asked. "I did strike down a woman, after taking up the sword."

"That was most likely her," I said. "Information is sparse about how she got here or why she did anything, since there's nothing quite like a demon of Absence to obscure your trail."

"How grotesque," the Mirror Knight said, disgusted.

I wouldn't disagree, there. There wasn't really much of anything that could ever justify use of demons.

"The Fallen Monk and the Rex Axe are the last two known collaborators," I continued. "The former attempted to kill me and then the Hierophant, while the latter tried to assassinate the Kingfisher Prince after I sent him to ensure her safety."

The man started in surprise.

"You tried to ensure the protection of the Red Axe?" he said.

"She's a prisoner," I flatly said. "And therefore in our care until she has stood trial. Prince Frederic struck me as the man to see to her safety and I was not wrong in my judgement, though that task ended poorly for him."

"Antoine tells me he was wounded," the Mirror Knight tried.

"He'll live," I said. "I'd be surprised if it doesn't leave a scar on his neck, but he'll still be ridiculously pretty even with it."

The green-eyed man snorted, though he then tried to disguise it as a cough.

"It is an act of gallantry for a man to receive a scar in the defence of a woman, even if it is in the defence of herself," Christophe de Pavanie said. "I'm sure he will wear it as the badge of pride it is."

I had my doubts any sort of a prince would take to a murder attempt so lightly, but you never knew with Procerans. Not that it'd mean a thing, anyway. Whether or not the Kingfisher Prince complained under the Terms, such an egregious and open breach of them would have to be addressed. Not that we could hang her *twice*, anyway, though some of the Named in my charge were bound to argue for me to at least try.

"Might be," I said, noncommittal, and sipped from my glass.

The dark-haired man half-smiled and reached for his cup, until now left untouched, fingers closing around the gilded crystal rim before he froze. Slowly he looked up at me, dark green eyes narrowed.

"We wouldn't have had this conversation," the Mirror Knight quietly said, "if I'd not taken up the sword, would we?"

I hesitated for just the fraction of a moment and my mind whispered *mistake* as Christophe de Pavanie's face closed down. He rose to his feet, curtly bowing.

"If I might take my leave, Black Queen?" he said. "If there any need for further discussion, we can speak again after the Red Axe is released."

Wait, what? From what part of this conversation had he gotten *that*?

"And what do you mean by that, exactly?" I mildly asked.

"That once the White Knight comes, it must be recognized that like myself and other Chosen she was made a tool to the Wandering Bard's schemes," the Mirror Knight. "The only righteous outcome is to pardon her for her actions."

"That is not my understanding of the situation," I coldly said. "And neither do I believe it will be the White Knight's."

Christophe de Pavanie, risen to his full height, stared down at me with green eyes.

"I pray you are wrong," he said, "else I will be forced to ask a question I would rather not."

"And what would that be?" I replied, thinly smiling.

"What is the Sword of Judgement, without Judgement?" the Mirror Knight asked.

Just a sword, he didn't say, but I heard it anyway as he left with the Severance and I didn't stop him.

Just a sword, and he had one of those too.

Chapter 27: Nigh

"When using tigers you don't have enough time to gloat, when using rats you risk awkwardly running out of gloat before the end: true equilibrium is found in a pit of humble man-eating tapirs, beasts that have never once failed me."

– Dread Empress Atrocious, later devoured by man-eating tapirs

I woke up with a stiff back and an aching leg.

I'd courted as much by sleeping in a chair instead of a bed, but I'd not had it in me to retire to my rooms. Groaning as I shook off the last pangs of sleep and felt out the throbbing side of my leg – today wasn't going to be one of the good days, I could already sense it – I pulled back my hand to settle my messily loose hair some. The pale glow of the magelights in the healing ward's private room was hard on the eyes, somehow harsh and cold compared to the way the light of day felt. The Arsenal was not growing on me: the endless bare hallways and the dusty air had me more restless than even the Everdark had back in the day. Below the earth, moving through caves and tunnels, it'd still felt like my feet were on the ground. Here, though, it all felt fake. Unnatural.

Swallowing a yawn and stretching, I finally made myself look at the man lying on the bed by chair. Hakram's upper body was bare and I could see his hairless and muscled chest rise and fall as he breathed, the steady rhythm ensured by the sorcery woven over his mouth and nose. A ball of spelled air, made thicker and almost translucent by the nature of the spell, was ensuring that he would keep breathing steadily even should his body fail as it already had several times. Gods, my heart still clenched every time I looked at him. I could not see the leg and the chunk of hip – including bone – he'd lost, as they were under the blanket, but there was no hiding his carved-up flank and the stump of his arm. The priests, the mages and even Masego were all in agreement: there could be no healing most of this.

In time flesh would grow back over the bared ribs and the stumps would cease to be purplish scabs, but there could be no question of attaching another limp even if we managed to get another one from an orc or even grow something through sorcery. Wounds inflicted by the Severance could be fully mended by neither sorcery nor Light. I'd already asked Hierophant to begin work on prosthetics, but the cuts through bone at the hip and leg were... Hakram's fighting days were likely over. After months of bedrest and the finest prosthetics the Arsenal could create, he might be

able to walk around without help. Might. But he would no longer be fit for battle, that much couldn't be denied. I did not realize I was worrying my lip with my teeth as I looked at him until the door was cracked open and I released it.

My lips were dry, and my teeth sharp, so I tasted a fleck of blood against the roof of my mouth as I turned to see who'd intruded.

"Cat?" Archer quietly asked as she poked her face in. "Ah, good, you're awake."

She opened the door further with her foot and came in with a wooden tray. The smell from the pastries on it, some sort of Proceran pasties filled with cheese and herbs, wafted in.

"Breakfast," she announced.

"Thanks," I wanly smiled, waving her in.

I noticed a steaming mug besides the pastries, filled with something liquid and dark. Indrani crossed the room, letting the door close behind her, and passed me the tray even as she sat down in one of the seats by mine. The moment my hands were occupied supporting it she pre-emptively stole one of the pastries, which had my lips twitching, and I settled the tray on my knees with a nod of thanks. I sniffed at the mug and my brow rose when I recognized the distinct scent of the herbs Masego used to give me for pain back in the day.

"Cocky had a few," Indrani shrugged in answer when I glanced at her.

How like her, I fondly thought, to mention that in a transparent attempt to draw attention from the gesture of bringing the mug. Or from having remembered this precise recipe even years later. It was rare for her to bother with little things like this, usually when someone brought me a meal it was – the thought soured me, and I breathed out shallowly. I made myself take a bite from one of the remaining pastries, the crust falling apart in my mouth and the warm cheese drowning out the taste of the herbs. It was tasty enough, and filling, so I tore through two before stopping to breathe.

"Thanks," I told Archer. "Didn't realize how hungry I'd gotten. What time is it?"

"An hour before Morning Bell," she replied.

Past dawn, then. This would make it the longest night of sleep from the four I'd had since the culmination of the Bard's plots in the Arsenal. Indrani had not, I noted, bothered to wipe away the mess of crumbs she'd made eating her own pastry. Hiding a

slightly crusty smile at the sight, I sipped at the brew. The taste was as dubious as I remembered, but it'd do wonders for my leg without needing to draw on Night.

"You don't usually wake me, much less bring me breakfast," I leadingly said.

"I did in the Everdark, sometimes," she defended.

"Like we didn't make Akua cook whenever we could," I snorted.

Indrani was a much better cook than either Akua or me, in truth, but she was also in no way above taking a nap and letting someone else handle it after a long day of marching.

"Making the only known poisoner among us handle the stew," Archer dryly said. "Yeah, that sounds about right for our little Everdark walkabout."

I snorted. That whole affair had been an exercise in recklessness, it was true, for all that in the end it'd turned out mostly well. I did not immediately answer, instead enjoying the silence as I sipped at my mug. She'd probably come for a reason, but I was in no hurry to press her for it.

"Sometimes I wonder how it would have been down there, if he'd come along like he wanted to," Indrani said, eyes going to our unconscious friend.

Not even Masego could tell us when he'd wake. There wasn't exactly a known precedent to call on for demonic taint followed by a cut of the Severance.

"We would have been better off," I said. "And Callow would have fallen to pieces."

She hummed, not exactly in agreement but not disagreeing either.

"Always thought you were much rougher on Vivienne and the Hellhound than him, for that mess we found in Iserre," Indrani suddenly said. "He had just as big a hand in it, but his chewing out was had in private."

"Juniper and Vivienne had titles, he didn't," I replied. "I wouldn't have been quite to brutal with those two if not for their blunders in 'welcoming' me, either. Couldn't afford not to, after those."

"You also like him most," Indrani frankly said.

I jolted in genuine surprise, looking askance at her.

"It's fine," she waved. "I'm not getting all jealous on you, Cat. And it's not like you really play favourites in the Woe. Hakram's

been with you from start, the longest of any of us, so you two have always been the closest in some ways."

I didn't bother to argue that I didn't sleep with Hakram, since we both knew that was a different thing. Her nebulous but inarguably existing partnership with Masego involved not a speck of bedplay, as far as I knew, but that in no way took away from the importance of it to both involved.

"Sometimes I think I might be afraid of becoming Black, if we make it all through the next decade," I admitted.

She didn't immediately speak, and I appreciated the moment to gather my thoughts as I drank.

"The rest of you wandering off to see to your own lives, the way the Calamities did with him," I said. "I never had to worry about that with Hakram. I knew he'd stick with me into Cardinal and the Accords."

It was never something we'd outright discussed, but more than once common plans had been drawn for things that the two of us would be able to do when the city was raised, together. It seemed faraway now, watching him breathe on that bed. I snorted.

"He wants to make cisterns up in the mountains, you know," I said. "With canals that'd lead the water down to the city since water's going to be an issue if it gets too large."

"Wouldn't that be something to see," Indrani softly said.

"Nonsense it what it is," I smilingly said. "We should drain one the lakes up there and gate it down instead, much more practical."

How many times had we had that debate? Must have been at least a dozen, I knew all the arguments for and against by rote. It'd gotten stale, retreading the same grounds, but I'd still give a queen's ransom to tread them once more with him right now. I breathed out, looking away.

"You know you're going to have to leave him behind, don't you?" Indrani gently said.

I turned so quickly I almost dropped the tray.

"Excuse me?" I flatly said.

"He's in no state to be transported," Archer said, not cowed by my glare in the slightest. "And even if he was, the Arsenal is the best place for him to recover. He can be fitted for the prosthetics here as they're being made, and there's not a place with more or more kinds of healers on the continent. If you take

him with you Cat, it won't be for *his* benefit. It'll be for yours."

"I can't just let him rot here," I hissed.

"Masego will be attending him," Indrani said.

"Masego will *remember* to attend him in between more important things," I bit out.

A moment of silence passed, Archer saying nothing.

"I didn't mean that," I finally said.

It was doing a disservice to him. Masego was sometimes forgetful, but never when it came to taking care of one of us.

"I know," Indrani said. "Like you know you won't be able to stay here by his bedside forever. There's still a war on outside, and it needs you."

"Some days I wonder," I darkly said. "We managed to chase off the Intercessor, 'Drani, but what else do we have to show for this? Entire sections of the Arsenal trashed or tainted, a pile of dead soldiers and Named, a fucking knot of politics to entangle that just got even more knotted. The Mirror Knight has the fucking sword, and he's not going to give that back even if asked nicely."

"You drove back a creature that gives even the Hidden Horror the shivers," Archer said. "If there *wasn't* a pack of ruins on fire left behind, Cat, I'd be a lot more worried."

I took my mug in hand and reached to set aside the tray, swallowing a hiss at the way the move pulled at my leg, but Indrani leaned over and set it on the ground instead. I gestured in thanks, which she airily dismissed.

"And Mirror Knight trying to play politics won't amount to shit," Archer continued. "Most Dominion people can't stand him, and it's not like him having a real cutty sword is going to impress Hasenbach or Malanza. And if both those two tell him to sit down and shut up, I don't care whose daughter he's fucking: there's no one in Procer who's going to argue."

"It's a sword made to kill the Dead King, Indrani," I said. "And we only have one of those. That gives him clout, whether I like it or not."

"Balls to that," Archer said. "I don't care how many Mirror Knights we throw at Keter, it's not going to get shit done. You think it's the first time the Original Abomination got some scrappy hero with powerful aspects and a fancy sword knocking at his gate? He'll snap that boy over his fucking knee, Cat. The

Saint might have pulled it off, 'cause she was hard and canny and gone feral in the Heavens way, but the *Mirror Knight*? He's just some asshole. Not the worst I've seen, and sure he tries, but when it comes down to it he's still just some jackass with a sword."

"If he was just that, I'd have gotten him under control by now," I said.

"Way you told it to me, you treated him like Black and the Empress treated you back in the day," Indrani said. "That wasn't going to work."

"It usually does," I said through gritted teeth.

And Christophe de Pavanie wasn't an idiot: I'd shown him how I did things, and then explained *why* they needed to be done that way. I'd even thought it was working, for all that I was wary of him and probably not hiding it entirely. I still had no real idea what had set him off at the end, though there was no denying I'd botched my handling of his little tantrum.

"Yeah, but you're the Black Queen," Archer said. "If you're being nice to him, it's probably a plot. If you're being mean to him, it's probably a plot. If you're not being anything to him, *it's probably a plot*. There's a reason it's Shiny Boots in charge of the heroes and not you, Catherine. Most of them still think you're out to get them."

She might be right, but I wasn't convinced. Still, there was no denying I was in a position where trying to keep forcing the matter would do a lot more harm than good. For now all that I could do was let sleeping dogs lie – and keep an eye on the dogs, just in case.

"Shiny Boots will be coming soon, at least," I grunted. "By midday tomorrow."

"The Painted Knife and her band the day after," Indrani said, "then Vivienne and Hasenbach the day after. It's going to get lively around here."

I didn't answer, resuming sipping at my brew as I watched Hakram from the corner of my eye. Silence stretched out again, almost peaceful.

"I want to be here when he wakes up," I said. "I can't help but feel that is the least of the least I could do, 'Drani."

"The conference won't be done in a day," Archer replied.

But it wouldn't last forever either, I knew. And if it ended and Hakram had not yet woken up... Gods, how was it a harder decision

to leave him behind than to send soldiers into battles where I knew many of them would die?

"Yeah," I finally said. "It won't be done in a day."

It was the coward's way out, but I still hoped it was a decision I simply wouldn't have to make. My mug was nearly empty now, so I drank down the last of the bitter brew and set it aside.

"So why is it that you came to wake me, anyway?" I asked.

"Prince Pretty is about and kicking, the Physician finally cut him loose," Indrani said. "He was looking to speak to you when you have a moment."

I groaned and began to rise to my feet.

"Might as well," I said, reaching for my staff. "I feel like I need to stretch my legs a bit."

"That's the spirit," Archer grinned. "I'll keep watch on Hakram, you go and breathe some slightly more fresh air."

—

I washed myself and changed clothes first. With a washbasin and a cloth, not a bath: the Arsenal had no source of water, which meant it had to be brought in from Creation by barrels. The practical limits to doing that meant it was permanently rationed, and though I could have probably flouted the rule I saw no real reason to. I dragged out a leather hunting doublet – which I'd never actually used for hunting – and loose black trousers I could tuck into my boots, pulling my wet hair into a braid and loosening my cloak around my neck. It wasn't exactly court clothes, or queenly ones, but I had a limited patience for both and the only way I'd ever put on full Proceran royal dress was if they dressed up my corpse. Cordelia somehow managed to make it seem natural, but I had a deep and instinctual distrust for anything involving that many ribbons and knots.

I'd asked attendants to find out where Prince Frederic was before going into my quarters, so by the time I left them the answer was awaiting me. It also had me raising an eyebrow, since I'd expected any conversation between us would be taken care of in a private audience room or either our quarters. Instead the Prince of Brus was currently breaking his fast in the meal hall where I'd found Archer on the day of my arrival. Except she'd used it when it was empty, while around this time there were bound to be more than a few full tables. Well, at least my hair would dry a tad on the way there. I'd somewhat learned my way around the Arsenal, what with all the traipsing about I'd done here, so to get to the hall I needed no guide.

It was a quick enough walk – the architects who'd designed the place had clearly known the Alcazar would be hosting the people who paid them, and so positioned it very conveniently – and I got through it briskly, the herbal brew having finally kicked in enough I could put a bit of a spring to my limp without swallowing a wince every time. The meal hall was a little over half-full, as I'd expected, offering up the sight men and women from their twenties to their dotage in three colours of robes. I would have expected some degree of clannishness but even those who most stuck to their own kind, the white-robed priests, had but a few islands of pale while most were spread out. The mages and the scholars, in red and bronze, were seated seemingly without thought to affiliation.

The closest thing there were to clans were actually the tables with Named, which everyone else avoided. In the back, near the corner, the Blade of Mercy and the Blessed Artificer were quietly speaking as they ate together. Closer to me I saw the Kingfisher Prince laughing at something Roland had said, the Harrowed Witch looking at them warily but also seemingly a little charmed. More than a few gazes turned my way when I limped in, a hush falling over the room. I said nothing, only making my way to Prince Frederic's table and clapping Roland's shoulder in thanks when he made some room for me to sit by his side.

"Your Majesty," the Harrowed Witch greeted me.

"Good morning," I said, then nodded at the others. "And to the both of you as well."

"Better yet for the pleasure of your company, Queen Catherine," Frederic Goethal smiled.

"Yes," the Rogue Sorcerer drily said. "That."

My gaze flicked to the side of the Kingfisher Prince's pale neck, where a thin red line went around with an even neatness that was somehow pleasing to the eye. Hells, if I'd not known better I would have believed it a tattoo. A rather tasteful one, at that.

"This is highly unfair," I complained. "How does the scar make you *prettier*? Mine just make me look like I got mauled."

I got treated to the sight of Frederic Goethal's eyes going wide in surprise, and the Prince of Brus politely coughed into his fist as Roland loudly choked. I glanced at the Witch, cocking an eyebrow and she reluctantly offered me a nod of agreement. See? *It's not just me.*

"I thank you for the compliment, Your Majesty," the Kingfisher Prince got out.

"Catherine," Roland muttered, aghast. "You can't just hit on a prince of the blood in the middle of the meal hall."

"I'm just stating the truth," I protested. "Look at Aspasia, she's not disagreeing is she?"

"I have finished my meal," the Harrowed Witch hastily said, "and so take my leave, with your permission."

Before said permission could either be offered or denied, she just as hastily bowed and made her escape. A cannier tactician than I'd expected, that one.

"Look what you did," Roland reproached.

"War makes beasts of us all," I solemnly said.

This time it was the Prince of Brus that choked, but in amusement. After mastering himself he poured me a cup of what looked like warm milk – with honey and something else in, maybe cloves going by the smell? – and offered it, which had my eyes sharpening. This was a rather informal setting, but he'd still poured for me. To an Alamans, which this one was for all that he'd spent the last few years being the darling of the Lycaonese, that implied either intimacy or the sort of admission of lower status that a prince of Procer would not, strictly speaking, need to offer me. Over the years First Princes had often tried to pass kingship of Callow as a rank of nobility below their own office, making it equivalent to that of the lesser western royalty instead.

Cordelia Hasenbach had never tried that with me: even back when she'd called me Your Grace instead of Your Majesty, it'd been with the implication that a *proper* queen of Callow would have warranted the latter appellation.

"Thank you," I slowly said, cocking my head to the side.

It was a statement, what he'd just done, and he'd chosen to do it in front of more than half a hundred people. Including several Named. The sole Named among Proceran royalty had just implied intimacy and trust in me in a subtle but very public way, which would not be something without consequence. I drank from the cup, and though it was too sweet for my tastes forced myself to swallow. Frederic Goethal had been raised to the Ebb and Flow during an era that Procerans still called the Great War, so I did not doubt he knew exactly what he'd just done. It explained why we were meeting here, even. It also left me feeling somewhat indebted to him, even if I'd not sought out the gesture, which I doubted was a coincidence.

"How is the Adjutant, if I might ask?" Roland quietly said.

I told him, and the conversation drifted towards that and other idle talk about the state of the Arsenal – there would need to be a hard look taken at the tainted parts of it before the First Prince could step foot here – that lasted until my cup and their plates ran empty. The Rogue Sorcerer skillfully took his leave after that, which left me alone with the Prince of Brus.

“I must confess to a degree of restlessness, now that I’ve been allowed to escape the infirmary,” the Kingfisher Prince idly said.

“I can sympathize,” I said.

I’d spent a lot of my early years as the Squire going from one healing ward to another.

“Then perhaps you might care to escort me to that fighting pit in the Frolic, Your Majesty,” Prince Frederic suggested. “If I do not exercise my arm at least a little I might just go mad.”

Mhm. A genuine request, or just an excuse for the two of us to be able to talk in a more private setting? Either way I had little reason to refuse.

“I could use the walk,” I agreed.

—

It’d been idle but pleasant talk all the way to the Frolic, which was empty at this time of the day.

Mind you it was an amusingly fresh experience to pass by a brothel with a genuine Proceran prince, an establishment he couldn’t possibly have missed even if he was too polite to comment on it. The fighting pit was just as deserted at the rest of this area, rafters empty and sand untouched, although by the looks of the pair of practice swords left at the edge of the stands a servant must have come through at some point. I cocked an eyebrow at the fact that there were two swords there: unless the Kingfisher Prince had ceased using a shield, that meant he expected to be exercising his arm against someone. Unhurried, the fair-haired man went down the stairs and undid the straps keeping the dull swords in place.

“The First Prince will be arriving tomorrow, along with your Lady Dartwick,” Frederic Goethal told me. “Word was sent to me overnight.”

Quicker than we’d thought. They’d get here the same day as the White Knight, then.

“Good to know,” I cautiously replied. “We have much to talk about.”

The pale-skinned man took up one of the swords, testing its weight first by holing the grip and then by a succession of swift swings.

"You and I do as well, Your Majesty," Frederic Goethal seriously said.

He tossed me the sword, which I'd half expected. It'd been well thrown so I snatched it out of the air easily. The balance was a little off for me – I preferred a heavier pommel and a longer blade – but I was out of practice anyway. It'd hardly make a difference.

"It's been some time since I used one of those," I warned him.

"So I've heard," the Prince of Brus said, eyeing me openly, "yet the instincts will still be there, and you have the fitness for it."

I might not have been entirely opposed to being looked up and down by Frederic Goethal in different circumstances, but it hadn't been that kind of look: he'd been gauging callouses and muscles, not how well I might fill my clothes.

"Swords and a chat, huh," I said. "Fair enough. I can work with that."

I made my way down the stairs, leaning on my staff, and after dulling my bad leg with a quick touch of Night leapt down and landed on the sands in a crouch, Mantle of Woe billowing around me. Prince Frederic's boots touched the pit floor a moment later with catlike grace. His loose white long-sleeved shirt – with those puffy Alamans sleeves – and silken trousers would have made him seem like some lordling who'd stumbled into the wrong place by accident, if not for the comfortable way he held his dulled blade. Idly I spun my own sword to loosen my wrist, considering how best to approach. He'd weigh more, and be quicker on his feet, but that'd been true of a lot of my opponents over the years. It was hard to decide how best to attack when I still only had vague notions of how skilled he might be.

"So the swords are bare, but what is it we're meant to be talking about?" I probed.

"We have trouble brewing," the Prince of Brus said, "of a most inconvenient kind."

Ever light on his feet he approached, and I tested his guard with a flick of the blade he allowed to touch his but otherwise ignored. The fair-haired man began to circle me rightwards, which I reciprocated in the opposite way.

"You'll have to elaborate," I said. "It's been one of those months."

The prince darted forward, sword going to the side in what I realized too late to have been a feint, but when he struck at a sharp angle that would have hit my swordholding wrist he found instead that a hard blow of my staff forced him to withdraw.

"How unsporting," Frederic Goethal boyishly grinned.

"I don't recall agreeing to swords only," I nonchalantly replied.

He laughed and we began circling each other again.

"I have decided not to press charges against the Red Axe under the Terms," the Kingfisher Prince said, and my eyes narrowed, "though I am not unaware that ultimately means little."

"There was no need for that little piece of theatre in the meal hall, if you meant to throw in with the Mirror Knight," I noted.

"It is a personal decision, not a political one," he admitted. "I have known hatred, how it can twist you. The Red Axe was done great wrongs, and the depth of the hatred born of them makes anything I have partaken of a pittance. I do not forgive or forget her attack, but neither would I see her slain on my behalf."

I slid a step to the side, sweeping low with my staff and baiting the attack I'd expected to follow. He was too quick on his feet to resist such an opening, dancing around my sweep and darting a strike out at my shoulder. Grip shifting, I grabbed the edge of my cloak with my freed fingers and swept the strike into the cloth, nearly ripping the blade out of his grasp. Yet nimbly he went, retreating out of my range before I could try to hem him in. The tricky bastard.

"It won't change that she killed the Wicked Enchanter," I said.

"Or that she tried to open my throat, lack of complaint or not," Frederic of Brus acknowledged. "Unfortunately, the latter of these might turn out to be the most trouble. Though I am of the Chosen, I am also a prince of the blood and the anointed ruler of Brus. The First Prince is of the opinion, and to my regret I cannot disagree, that my attempted killer must stand trial under Proceran law."

"By any reasonable measure she'll get the-" I almost said headman's axe, but it would have been both ghastly and a pun, "-noose for the Enchanter, which would allow us to sidestep that issue outright."

It wasn't that I couldn't see where Cordelia was coming from, really. One of the heroes had just stuck a sword in the neck of one of her empire's ruling nobility, if she *didn't* act then she was legitimizing the right of heroes to pull shit like this in years to come. On the other hand, coming from the side of the Truce and Terms, we were going to see more than a few desertions if turned out that we were all subject to Proceran laws. People just didn't trust the Principate that much, and given what the Sisters had shown me of the plotting in Cleves it wasn't without reason. The unspoken conflict of authority between the officers of the Terms and the crowned heads of the Grand Alliance had been from open conflict so far, with great care, but this seemed like just the kind of mess to make it into a very spoken conflict instead.

"If the situation in the Arsenal had unfolded differently, that might have been an elegant solution," the Kingfisher Prince acknowledged. "Unfortunately, the Mirror Knight now wields the Severance and he has ties to the Langevins of Cleves. Whose loyalties have waned even as their ambitions waxed."

The Prince of Brus raised his sword high, blue eyes cool.

"If Chosen striking at royalty is left unpunished," Prince Frederic gravely said, "we believe that my neck might just have healed from the first blow struck in the Principate's next civil war."

Chapter 28: Contend

"Diplomacy is not an art of peace or a higher calling, it is the act of nations bartering what they disdain for what they desire."
– Magister Haides Katopodis the Elder of Stygia

The sword came forward in swift thrust that I let come close, as Prince Frederic's footing told me it was just a feint.

"My people don't have a great opinion of royalty west of the Whitecaps, as a rule," I said.

Or east of the Wasiliti, south of the Hwaerte and north of Daoine. Callowans were less than fond of foreign crowns in general, was the point, though it would be impolitic to belabour it.

"Not without reason," the Prince of Brus replied.

I limped to the side, baiting an attack with an opening that was seized without hesitation – an opportunist, this one, man after my own heart – and the Kingfisher Prince's sword came swiftly from the side. I spun, putting my weight on my good leg, and swept him back with a swing he easily avoided but set him up for

a longer thrust with the tip of my staff. Leaning backwards and edging his head to the side by half an inch, he narrowly avoided the second blow. It ruffled his blond locks some, and I only partly managed to catch his own blow with the crossguard of my practice sword. He was better than Ishaq with a blade, I decided, but not as physically strong. That last catch with my crossguard would have broken my wrist if I'd tried it with the Barrow Sword. The Kingfisher Prince was quicker on his feet, though, and that was a lot trickier for me to handle given my limp.

"I like to think so," I said. "Which means when even *I* say that I have doubts Gaspard Langevin of Cleves, whose lands are on the frontline of a war with Keter, would be enough of a fool to try something? A claim like yours begs an elaboration."

Of course, he probably hadn't meant a civil war that'd begin tomorrow. Even princes who despised Cordelia – and there were more of those than I'd once thought – wouldn't try to start one in the Principate when it was under siege from the Dead King and swarming with foreign armies it currently required to continue existing. But if this was headed where I thought it was headed, then Cordelia Hasenbach's envoy was going to make her position and intentions clear as spring water. And her offer as well, I thought, because if I knew anything about the First Prince it was that she always had one of those up her sleeves.

"Such a war would yet be on the horizon," the fair-haired prince agreed. "Yet it looms tall there. Before I elaborate, if you might permit an insolence? It has been suggested by advisers to Her Most Serene Grace that you have become aware of what stirs in Cleves."

He came in close, this time. Dropped under the swing of my staff, a half-step took him right out of the way of my sword's sideways swipe and he aimed his own blow perfectly. Unfortunately for him, I wasn't in the habit of playing fair: fingers abandoning my staff to stand perfectly still, I withdrew my hand and just in front of his face snapped my fingers. Eyes widening, he hastily withdrew with swiftness that was too smooth and sudden to have been entirely natural. I took back my staff, beginning to circle him again as absolutely nothing happened. I'd known for a while that the Pilgrim had given a pretty good accounting of my skills with Night, so I was not surprised in the least that the assessment had made it to the Principate's sole royal hero.

"A bluff," the Kingfisher Prince grinned.

"I don't know," I shrugged, keeping down a smile, "was it?"

I was, against my better judgement, enjoying myself. I'd always had a weakness for the pretty ones, especially if they could handle themselves.

"The Augur or the Thorns?" I asked.

"The Circle of Thorns," the Prince of Brus said, "noticed a sudden rise in the antipathy of certain sigils in Cleves towards Cleven forces."

The strength and weaknesses of the Firstborn in a sentence, that: skilled enough to spy on a hero, sloppy enough people who couldn't even speak their tongue could read them. The Everdark had forged them into one of those blades of obsidian they so loved: remarkably sharp in some ways, remarkably brittle in others. Neither of us commented on the fact that we'd both been spying on allies, which was for the best considering neither of us had any intention of stopping. Gods, but what I wouldn't do for spies as good as the Circle of Thorns.

The Jacks were, in truth, better than such a young and haphazard organization had any right to be. That they could operate outside Callow at all was damned impressive, all things considered, much less with the amount of success they'd had. But the Thorns were still several notches above even the best of what the Jacks could do. Imagining the kind of access their long-standing rivals, the Eyes of the Empire, must have back in Callow had caused many a worried night. Even after several purges and Scribe outing part of the network to me as appeasement back in Salia, I doubted we'd flushed all of them out.

Black and Malicia had spent two decades digging them in, it'd likely take just as long to dig them out.

"I got wind of Gaspard's ambitions to expand the boundaries of the Principate," I acknowledged. "And of how his daughter's been spending some of her evenings."

"The First Prince passes along her appreciation of how measured your response has been," the blue-eyed man told me.

I went on the offensive, this time. Came in low, sweeping with the sword so he'd have to parry, and then struck with the staff. In an impressive display of skill, at the last moment he angled his parry so that my sword would get in the way of my staff, then without missing a beat tried to trip my bad leg. I managed to pivot on myself, Mantle of Woe fluttering and hiding away my body as he withdrew his blade and tried a downwards cut. I slapped it aside with the staff and gave ground, which he graciously enough allowed.

"Don't thank me yet," I said. "Sve Noc were livid, and I have visions to share of the kind of casualties the Empire Ever Dark has taking up north to drive home exactly what kind of an ally your man in Cleves is tempting to walk away."

"Given the unpopularity of the current levies and taxes with the people, ordering Prince Gaspard's arrest might result in the current riots turning into uprisings," the Kingfisher Prince said. "I assure you, it is not apathy to the bad faith on display that has stayed the First Prince's hand."

"You know," I mused, "I even believe that. Mostly. But here's the deeper issue behind all this, Frederic of Brus."

I touched my arm with Night and struck out, viper-quick: when the prince parried he found me significantly stronger than before, and in the misaligned surprise of his parry the tip of my staff hit his shoulder once and sharply.

"A Proceran prince is scheming, which threatens the war against Keter," I flatly said. "Proceran politics prevent anyone from doing anything about it, which threatens the war against Keter."

I struck out again, even as he gave ground, and when with Name-strength he turned aside my sword and staff I abandoned the latter and spun about. When I snapped my fingers he thought of it as a bluff, at least until dark light bloomed. A closer look at the purely decorative effect gave me the barest of openings to slug him in the stomach, though he rolled with the blow and so it was barely more than a caress to a martial Named like him.

"A Proceran heroine tries to kill Proceran royalty, which threatens the war against Keter," I continued. "And then *another Proceran hero* snatches up a unique artefact forged through the efforts of several Named to kill the Dead King and begins making demands, which once again threatens the war against Keter."

I ceased moving, even as he got back his footing and raised his guard.

"Do you perhaps begin to divine a pattern to our troubles, Prince Frederic?" I bluntly asked.

I wasn't blind to the fact that the Dominion was having some growing pains of its own when it came to the Truce and Terms. It would have been hard to when I'd been forced to look those very troubles in the eyes through the Barrow Sword. Yet neither Ishaq nor the Blood were allowing their arguments to become a growing international crisis, so the way that Procer kept foisting its internal troubles onto everybody else was really starting to be a trial on my patience.

"That is the price to fighting this war on our lands instead of yours," the Prince of Brus bluntly replied.

He'd begun to take me halfway seriously, so instead of the almost teasing spar before I got a glimpse of what he looked like on a proper field of war: with dexterity he struck, baiting my parries

into overextending and then stinging like a wasp. Even with two weapons I found myself hard-pressed and forced to give ground.

"The Principate is crumbling," the Kingfisher Prince said as he kept advancing. "What few of our youths are not needed in fields and mines are sent north to die in dwarven armour we went into debt to buy. Royalty are now forced to confiscate the necessary goods they cannot pay for, while no grain has been set aside in two years because massive armies must be fed. Horses in the fields go without horseshoes because the blacksmiths were conscripted; fish is taken from the hands of fishermen as far south as Salamans so it can be salted and put in barrels headed north."

With a flashy snap of his wrist, he batted aside my parry and cut downwards at my wrist. I didn't drop my blade, but it was a near thing and I was sure to get a bruise. If the sword had not been dulled, I'd be seeing bone. I chased him away with a swing of my staff, though he retreated at his leisure and without giving openings.

"What you condemn as our fecklessness is in truth the death rattle of a nation of millions," Prince Frederic said. "And while I confess I know little of your people, Queen Catherine, I doubt they would fare any better under this strangling grasp than we have."

"I won't deny that Procer has been taking the harshest losses in a lot of ways, or pretend that our sending coin and soldiers and grain is a true replacement for what was lost," I said. "But neither can you deny that your royalty has not been a constant thorn in the Grand Alliance's side at a time where we can ill afford that sort of foolishness."

"I do not deny it," the fair-haired man frankly said, "for it is the truth. Yet you have a reputation as a pragmatic woman, and so I expect you can recognize that regardless of what is deserved having Gaspard Langevin arrested is not a solution. It is a way to precipitate the collapse of the realm standing between Callow and the Dead King."

That was a solid retort, I had to give him that. And all of it true, if not necessarily answering my grievance.

"I didn't ask for Prince Gaspard in chains, or in a grave," I said. "What I am asking for is for the First Prince to get her people in order, before my own hands become tied and I *have* to act on this."

"Then the First Prince requests that you add your voice to the Red Axe standing trial before a tribunal of the Principate," Prince Frederic reluctantly asked. "As it would send a stark warning to the House of Langevin, as well see justice done."

Ah, and there we were. The reluctance told me this was more Cordelia than him, but nothing I'd heard about the Kingfisher Prince had let me to think he was a spineless lackey: if he was willing to pass along the request, then he at least saw the sense in it.

"So you approach me instead of the White Knight," I said, "since I'm more likely to be willing to deal."

It wouldn't be impossible to sell to my side of the fence that I'd simply traded the Red Axe's neck to Procer in exchange for concessions, if I could then distribute those concessions. And if she was still executed, then I genuinely shouldn't get too much trouble over this. Hanno, though? Hanno wouldn't bend the neck over this. *He might be more inclined to consider if Procer goes to him with my signature already on the parchment, though*, I thought, which explained with Cordelia Hasenbach was going to Below's side of the Terms first. Unfortunately, she'd misread me on this. The Truce and Terms were to be the foundation the Liesse Accords were built on, so my bottom line wasn't anywhere as flexible as she might have imagined.

"The White Knight has not ruled," the Prince of Brus said. "I admire his principles a great deal, but it does everyone a disservice to pretend that his political judgement is infallible."

"I don't disagree with him," I bluntly replied. "If the Red Axe doesn't stand trial as a Named but as a criminal under Proceran law, it erodes the foundation of the Terms."

"If Named are judged only by Named, then are two laws of the land," Frederic Goethal said.

I took a swift step forward and struck out with the blade, pressing down on his parry when he caught it.

"Oh, don't give me that shit," I said. "You're a prince of the blood, we both know that maybe in principle you get the same justice a peasant does but that's not how the world actually works."

"Yes," the Kingfisher Prince agreed, to my surprise, "which is why I am wary of enshrining near as unfair a distinction into law."

I was pushed back but slapped away his thrust with the side of my staff, losing no ground as we began circling each other again.

"You can't regulate Named like you would other people," I said. "It's not like making laws about magic or dealing with fae, you're basically dealing with wild horses – if you make the pen too small, they'll burst out. That's why the rules stay limited,

not because more wouldn't be a positive change. The point is to establish a foundation, a baseline that future generations can build on."

"If Named do not answer to the same laws as even princes, not even in principle," Prince Frederic said, "then they are by objective measure set above even royalty. That would birth an age of warlords, Queen Catherine. I do not believe Christophe de Pavanie is the kind of man who would use his strength to make himself a crown, but by would other Chosen and Damned not be tempted to seize power if they are above the laws of other men? You would make Named a kind of royalty standing above all the crowns of Calernia."

"If I'd written that in the Accords, you'd be right," I said. "But it isn't there. You can hang heroes and villains alike should they break Proceran laws – so long as the law doesn't simply outlaw being a villain. It's the Truce and Terms that extend these protections, and those last only until the Dead King is dealt with."

A feint with my staff, then I tried to whip at his wrist with the blade much as he'd done with me – instead he caught it with his crossguard and tried to flip my blade out of my fingers, though I withdrew before he could.

"The Terms are the predecessor to the Accords, it is openly known," the Prince of Brus retorted. "What becomes common practice now is likely to remain regardless of what is put to ink. If Chosen and Damned refuse to enforce the parts of those treaties they dislike, those that go against what they have become used to, how are we to make them obey?"

"Force, if need be," I said. "Even the most powerful of our kind can't take on armies alone, much less armies backed by those Named who *will* respect the Accords as written."

"What you describe is likely to lead to a civil war that would finish breaking apart Procer even should we defeat the Dead King," Prince Frederic said. "The schemes of the Tower set our principalities tearing at themselves for decades, and now the weight of the war against Keter teaches us fresh ways to despise each other. We will not survive a third conflict, Queen Catherine, not as a single nation."

He'd advanced and struck quickly, and at an angle where it was hard to drive him back, but I joined my staff to my sword and that forced him back a step.

"It's a convincing speech you made," I said, "but we both know that ultimately half of it is guesswork and predictions. If the Augur had predicted it, you'd have led with that. So we're left to choose behind the danger I see looming, Named seeing the Terms

and later the Accords as a tool for nobles to control them and so walking away, or the one you've described. One I can only see as avertable even should it come to pass."

"Your reluctance is not unforeseen," the Prince of Brus admitted. "Which is why I was asked to tell you that the First Prince is willing to sign the Liesse Accords as they currently stand should you concede in this."

I'd been angling towards his side with my sword raised, but at his words I drew back with a start of surprise.

"Lady Dartwick left me under the impression that there were still months of negotiations left to be had," I cautiously said.

"Yes," Frederic Goethal said, "and on all currently contested issues, the First Prince will concede."

Mhm. She couldn't speak for the Dominion, though, so while this was a significant concession it didn't end the negotiations outright. It'd still be a massive boon and one that put a *lot* of pressure on Levant to sign on as the terms were, or at least with minimal quibbling. And even should Hasenbach go to them in private to try to use them as proxy to continue negotiating – which I doubted, it'd be too starkly in bad faith – they were unlikely to champion points that favoured Procer without also helping them. It was damned tempting offer, which was nothing less than I should have expected coming from a diplomat of the First Prince's skill.

"Something to consider," I eventually replied.

There could be no serious expectation of my agreeing to this in the middle of spar, much less when I'd not spoken with Vivienne or had a recent look at the articles of the Accords still in dispute. But it was classic Hasenbach to use someone beholden to her yet on good terms with me to present her offer early, preparing the grounds before negotiations truly began – and well in advance of any rivals. Cordelia did like to win before the battles were had, when she could. I did not disapprove. Even her sort of battles could be messy and chancy things when started, no matter how well you might think the situation was in hand.

"A lot of this could be made simpler if you went out and asked for the Red Axe's head," I said. "Her attack could stand trial as both a breach of the Terms and Proceran laws, so we'd sidestep at least part of the troubles."

The fair-haired prince studied me closely.

"The two of you are more similar than either cares to admit," Prince Frederic said.

Ah. He'd gotten that speech from the other side as well, then. If Hasenbach hadn't managed to sway him, I very much doubted I'd be the one to manage it instead.

"I'll choose to take that as a compliment," I said.

"It was," he said. "And other things as well. It is a matter of conscience, Queen Catherine. I will not ask for a death I do not believe deserved."

His sword rose and I matched it with mine. Circling began again, my eyes lingering on his footing as he tested my defences with quick flicks. Looking for an opening to score a decisive blow and end this, I'd wager.

"That's an interesting stand to take, considering what you've just said about the White Knight," I said.

A deeper lunge, but I was low on my feet and in a swirl of my cloak obscuring my movements I pivoted and let him pass by me – though I wasn't quick enough to catch his back as he passed. We were face to face once more before I could even mount a proper attack.

"On matters of politics, I can and will compromise," the Kingfisher Prince calmly said. "But not on matters of integrity."

And the thing was, I respected that. Admired it, even. But when principle got in the way of itself, a closer look usually gave away that the whole affair was really about pride. I tested his guard with a flick of my staff, found it slow and pressed on. It'd been a trap, and he tried to slide under my guard in the beat where I began to move and my bad leg slowed me, but I'd been waiting for it. Finesse wasn't going to get me anywhere, so instead I bludgeoned at him as hard and quick as I could. It took him by surprise, enough that I drew back the staff and began to press him with both arms.

"I've lived most my life in the shadow of people that would use that rope to hang you twice over," I told him, ending the sentence with a flourish of the wrist.

The strike I'd thought would bruise his shoulder was instead caught with the very end of his own blade, Name-strength compensating for the poor angle I'd forced him to parry in.

"That a principle can be used against you does not invalidate it," Frederic Goethal fiercely said, "and decency is not made worthless for the use the indecent would make of it."

Even with a touch of Night, the difference in strength allowed him to first force away my sword and then rip it out of my grasp. He did not get to take the opening that gave him, though, as I

spun around his back and elbowed him harshly. He gave ground just in time to avoid the strike of my staff, and before he could turn on me I'd retreated – bending to snatch my blade up from the sand as I did.

"If the exercise of a virtue is put to the service of evil," I replied. "It is an accomplice to it, regardless of what else it might be."

The fair-haired prince had begun to use his Name more liberally, though he was keeping aspects out of this much like I was refraining from using workings of Night, so I'd have to adjust. I wouldn't be able to force my way through his guard anymore, even using both arms. Bait and flank, I decided. My staff was too long, it'd get in the way, but there were ways around that. Better wait for him to close in on me, though: my leg was beginning to throb so now was not the time to dart about.

"To put evil means in the service of good ends is still putting out evil in the world," the Kingfisher Prince replied. "We can quibble of lesser or greater evils as we wish, but averting harm is not the same as acting morally."

I'd turned this on him once or twice, so he came in careful. I took it as a mark of respect, coming from a swordsman of his calibre. A quick half-step forward, baiting out a strike of my staff that I gave him – he flowed into a high parry as he used his backfoot to quickly shoot forward, already trying to turn the first movement of his blade into the beginning of a strike at the side of my neck. I abandoned the staff, spinning to the side, but I'd used that on him twice now and he'd been waiting for it. A sharp strike of his elbow into my flank pushed me aside, putting me back into the trajectory of his swing if he finished the full arc. I dropped low and instead of pivoting anchored myself at a steady angle, ramming by shoulder into his chest even as he barrelled into me. He was light on his feet, though, impossibly so. Like he'd somehow turned into mist as he reversed his momentum, my shoulder hit nothing at all and I was instead forced into a damned awkward parry to cover my neck.

"Not the same at all," I agreed. "We just disagree on which is more important."

I saw the muscles in the prince's arm tightening as he put his back into the clash of blades and knew that in the heartbeat that followed my guard would give. So I gave with it, using the moment where he thought he'd gotten me to finally pivot around him like I'd already tried twice. I deftly flipped my grip and thrust under my armpit, though just before the tip of my practice sword could touch the ridge of his spine I found the edge of his own against my throat, ready to slit it. He must have begun reversing his swing the moment I began moving, to match my timing, and it

was with a degree of admiration I realized that meant he'd read my movements without even seeing them.

"Draw?" Prince Frederic lightly offered.

"Draws are for suckers," I replied, and tried to trip him.

He let out a startled laugh and turned around as I tried to tackle him down into the sand, dropping his sword to try to wrestle mine out of my grasp. We dropped down in a tangle of limbs, and perhaps I did not struggle quite as much as I could have to prevent Frederic Goethal ending up on top of me, holding down one of my wrists. His blond locks were a mess, he smelled lightly of sweat and not even those puffy sleeves were enough to take away from my enjoyment of the muscles under them. It would be bad politics to fuck a prince of the blood, I reminded myself as I looked into very blue eyes, and besides we were on sand.

I couldn't even be sure that he was interested, besides, although... I wiggled my hips under the thin pretence of struggling and got confirmation I might not be the only one finding our position startingly arousing, swallowing a pleased gasp. That knowledge did nothing to curb the temptation, especially not when I could feel his broad chest against mine and his face was so close I'd barely have to lean up to nip at his lip.

"You could have just declined to put forward charges," I said.

The tone came out more flirtatious than I'd intended, but I wasn't exactly biting my nails over it.

"It wouldn't have been as interesting," Prince Frederic replied, voice gone slightly husky.

All right, I could at least be honest enough with myself to admit that if we weren't out in the open – or at least not in sand – I'd be flipping him over and undoing his belt right now. *Shit*. This, uh, might end up being something of a problem.

"Maybe I'll take that draw, after all," I made myself say.

Best to make this about politics again, I decide, since I didn't usually wonder about how politics would feel between my legs. Although he was a prince, so if I wanted to get technical about it...

"Of course," the Prince of Brus agreed.

The fair-haired man released my wrist and then the rest of me, rising to his feet and gallantly offering his hand to help me up. I took it, still much too flustered and aroused for my own good.

"I get the feeling you're no exactly enthusiastic at the First Prince's method of solving this," I made myself say.

He offered me my sword by the handle, having picked the blades up while I adjusted my cloak on my shoulders. Nonchalantly, he tugged his shirt back into a semblance of order. It still fit him very nicely, I tried not to notice and promptly failed. I reined in my gaze before it could get me into any more trouble.

"I recognize the dangers she speaks of," the Prince of Brus admitted. "But while the necessity of staying them might be clear, it does not sit well with me that we have made a woman's life into a rag doll for half the world to pull at."

She's Named, I thought. We're all rag dolls for Creation to pull at, until enough gives we're only fit to be thrown away. The lucky ones among us got to accomplish a few things. The rest died remembered only as their killer's stepping stone.

"So what is it you'd do instead?" I asked.

The man was an idealist, but he wasn't a fool. He'd know that mouthing regrets at a course without offering another was just wind. The Prince of Brus considered me silently, seemingly sobered by the seriousness of the question I'd asked.

"I would begin," Frederic Goethal finally said, "by speaking with the Red Axe."

I clenched my fingers then unclenched them.

Well, I supposed it'd make a change from all this talking *about* her instead.

Chapter 29: Conviction

"The advantage of fair laws is not inherent but rather in the people's appreciation of them. It is therefore just as useful to offer only the perception of fair laws, and easier to attain."

– Extract from the treatise "On Rule", author unknown (widely believed to be Prince Bastien of Arans)

I'd avoided going to speak with the Red Axe.

I'd actually even gone further than that, avoiding sending anyone I trusted to speak with her in my stead. She was in a heavily warded cell, where she would benefit from the finest care the Arsenal could offer as a full contingent of armed soldiers guarded the door day and night with orders to let no one inside. It wasn't that I was afraid of speaking with the woman, though I suspected I'd come out of that conversation feeling like the monster that these days I so often was.

It was to prevent accusations, more or less. If she did something... strange during the trial and I'd been alone in a room

with her at some point, odds were it'd end up blamed on me. One of the Woe or even just a Named I was on good terms with were likely to end up facing the same sort of accusation if they went in my stead, so I'd been cautious and ensured she was isolated instead. Aside for meals and healing, the Red Axe saw no one.

Of course, the identity of the man now accompanying me meant that I'd be able to afford taking this risk. Frederic Goethal was both one of Above's and a prince of the blood, both things which would silence the Mirror Knight if he tried to kick up a fuss. If anything, the political inconvenience that was Prince Frederic refusing to ask for the Red Axe's head on a pike would only lend him greater moral credence should he vouch I'd been up to nothing. Why would the Prince of Brus enable by plot what he might have easily obtained by law and patience?

In truth I could probably have arranged an interrogation earlier, but it would likely have come at the price of Christophe de Pavanie or one of his still sparse following sitting in attendance of the talk. No so great a cost, on the surface, but the opposite on closer look. It'd be implying the that Mirror Knight and his crew had the right to oversee my activities as a high officer of the Truce and Terms.

I had no intention whatsoever of making that concession, not even in so unspoken a manner.

Over the last few days, in between bouts of thinking that some viperous tongues insisted might be brooding, I'd come to wonder if the trial ahead of the Red Axe was not just another avenue for the Intercessor to damage the Truce and Terms. I couldn't know how closely the heroine was aligned with the Bard, or even what she was truly after, but it did not take knowing either of those things to understand that the Rex Axe would be put in a room with some of the most powerful people in the Grand Alliance and allowed to speak her piece. I knew better than most how dangerous words could be if they were the right ones, spoken into the right ears. On the other hand, what else could I do but let this proceed?

If I'd let the Sinister Physician quietly dispose of her the risk would have been avoided, true, but only at the price of another, arguably worse risk. Gods, but I hated fighting the Bard. It had all the manners of unpleasantness of fighting Kairos and Akua to it, and then some nastiness all her own. I needed more information, in the end, and I now had a good opportunity to get it.

The Prince of Brus had sent for a coat before we headed out in the small nameless section where the prison cells of the Arsenal stood, conversation between us sparse as we moved. The intensity there'd been between us, down there in the sands, had cooled the further we got from them. I was not certain whether or not to be

pleased by that, but the conversation I knew lay ahead of me put out any remaining embers there might have been anyway.

I was not unaware that yet another reason I'd had to avoid the Red Axe was that I'd known the necessary would become harder once I had a face and a story to match the Name. It should not be, I knew. I'd killed, both in cold blood and in the heat of battle, and this heroine was nothing to me. No one. But while the orphan girl who'd played in the streets of Laure had grown into someone else, I'd not forgotten her.

Or that she'd taken her first steps down this road slitting open the throat of a rapist, something I was now going to hang another woman for.

"It is my understanding that she travelled with Lady Archer for some time, before coming to the Arsenal," Prince Frederic quietly said as we walked.

"Archer was the one to find her, or close enough," I confirmed. "Her intention was to drop her off here at the Arsenal, where her talents could be tested until the White Knight could decide on which front she might best assist the war effort."

I'd have been consulted as well before decisions were made, at which point the Wicked Enchanter would have come up and we'd have ensured those two would be as physically far from each other as possible. Distance and well-informed officers had served us well in this regard so far, and would have again if the pieces hadn't ended up aligning in just the precise way to foster a disaster.

"Then you will be aware that there were... circumstances," the Prince of Brus delicately said.

"I knew what the Wicked Enchanter was when he was brought into the Truce," I replied. "Disgusting as his actions were, they were granted amnesty."

Didn't mean I didn't have him marked in the back of my head for when the Truce and Terms ended, though. Under the Accords I owed the man nothing, and if heroes wanted to bury him in steel and Light the moment he resumed his old habits I would have raised a damned toast to the kill.

"I do not envy your office under the Terms," the fair-haired man admitted. "I am glad it is held, as I've seen what villains can bring to bear for our side of the war, but I envy it not in the slightest. It seems like a duty that would wear away at one's soul."

My lips thinned. That'd cut a little too close to home for comfort.

"That's the thing about being taught by Praesi," I blandly said. "You learn that, for all the preaching, souls are just another commodity to bargain with."

That killed the conversation the rest of the way to the cell.

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The Red Axe — I did not know her real name, leaving me only this to refer to her by even in my own mind — was looking rather healthy, for a woman who'd been shot by almost two dozen crossbow bolts. Fired by my legionaries looking to kill, too, not by sloppy amateurs. There were so many bandages wrapped around her torso that even through her dull brown prisoner's shift I could see them peek out. Though she was hardly in a state to walk around and I'd been told she still spent most of her days asleep, the heroine was not visibly feverish. There was a certain sickly pallor to her otherwise tan skin though, I judged, and her breathing was laboured. A heroic constitution and a swarm of priests had seen to an impressive recovery, though and when we entered her pale brown eyes were wide awake and unclouded.

"I'd get up if I could," the Red Axe greeted us in accented Chantant, "but my legs will not allow."

Even if they had, she was still shackled at her ankles. Cleverly done work with a loose enough chain she'd be able to move around some but not walk. A similar set was around her wrists, to be loosened only when she was helped to bathe once a day. She had still had the muscles arms I remembered from seeing her fresh to the infirmary, but they'd grown thinner. Even healing with Light had costs, and she'd needed a great deal of healing to pull through.

"Lady Red," the Kingfisher Prince greeted her, offering the slightest of bows.

"Prince," the heroine replied, grimacing.

"If I might introduce—" Prince Frederic began, but she interrupted him with a tired gesture.

"That cloak speaks," the Red Axe said. "Well met, Black Queen."

I did not let my frown touch my face. I'd been studying her as she spoke, but when she'd looked at me I'd not found any hostility. Was she a natural talent at obscuring her thoughts? Given that she'd come from the middle of nowhere, it seemed unlikely she would have been taught. Not impossible, though. It seemed unlike the Intercessor to linger around teaching anyone, but then I still knew depressingly little about her methods when out of my sight. There was a simpler explanation, too, but it struck me as unlikely.

"You're looking healthy," I said.

"Enough for the noose?" the Red Axe chuckled.

Blunt, but then when you were down in the pit there was rarely a point in pretending otherwise.

"The block's a lot more likely," I replied. "But there's to be a trial first."

"A *trial*," the brown-haired heroine said, her distaste clear. "Just get it over with, would you?"

"You have rights, Lady Red," the Prince of Brus reminded her.

"I also cut open your neck, Prince," the Red Axe said, tone calm. "Don't come in here pretending that's all forgotten. I won't have any of that."

"I have not forgot a moment of it, I assure you," the Kingfisher Prince replied, tone cool.

I noticed his hand twitch, on the side of his pale neck where the scar could be seen.

"But it does not change that you have rights and protections under Terms," Prince Frederic said.

Measuredly, the Red Axe turned to me.

"Can I renounce those, Black Queen?" she asked.

"I'm not your representative under the Terms," I said. "That's the White Knight, who'll be here soon enough."

"I remember the Archer's speeches," the heroine dismissed. "You did not answer my question."

I breathed out, studying her. She did not look angry or afraid, although there was something to her expression... *Impatient*, I decided. *She's impatient*. Yet I found none of the despair and hopelessness I would have expected of someone actively trying to hurry along their own death.

"No," I said. "Or I suppose it's more accurate to say that you could, but it'd hardly matter. You agreed to the Terms before coming here and committed breaches while a signatory. What follows will not change whether or not you renounce anything."

In principle an argument could be made that if I she signed a renunciation of her own free will before witnesses I could follow up by snapping her neck in the moment that followed without breaking the Terms, but in practice that'd just be throwing oil on an already crackling fire.

"The cogs of your bureaucracy are soaked in blood, Black Queen," the Red Axe said, offering a hard smile.

And in her eyes then, for the first time, I found something like hate. Not for me, which had been the part that tripped me up, but for the rest. I'd done her a disservice, I thought, in thinking that she could not hate the tower without also hating its architect. Something of that must have shown on my face, as the brown-haired prisoner let out a bitter chuckle.

"Sharp," the heroine said. "Sharp enough to cut yourself, Black Queen. Or everybody else."

There was pain there, I thought, and hurt. But it didn't own her, it didn't drive her. Whatever horror it was her Named had been forged out of, it had made her hate a cold and measured thing.

"You didn't kill the Wicked Enchanter in a red rage," I stated. "This was deliberate, and you know exactly what it is you're doing."

Thinking of her as a victim or an accomplice had been dead ends from the start, I was beginning to realize. *It is all objects in motion*, the Intercessor had told me. This wasn't the plot of an eldritch abomination in a woman's shape, not really. The Red Axe hadn't been *manipulated* into this. She'd wanted this, perhaps before the ever saw the Bard – if she'd ever seen her at all.

"I don't think you're a monster, Black Queen," the Red Axe told me. "A bad woman, maybe, but those aren't rare. I've seen a real monster, the *bleakness* at the heart of him, and I don't see it in you. I don't think the Archer could love you like she does, either, if you were like that."

"It's the Terms that are your enemy," I quietly said.

"I don't think you're a monster," the heroine repeated. "But your Truce and Terms? They're the most monstrous thing I ever saw. You took in every scrap of filth this world has to offer, knowing what they were, and you're *protecting* them."

"Without the Damned, we would not be alive to have this conversation," the Prince of Brus said.

I started, having almost forgotten his presence, and saw that same surprise on the prisoner's face. Frederic Goethal's silken coat had been pulled close around him as he leaned against the wall, the only overt sign of what I suspected to be discomfort.

"What was done to you..." the prince began, voice trailing off. "There is no excusing that. But the Truce and Terms are not responsible for that evil, and they *are* responsible for a great many saved lives."

"What was done to me," the Red Axe snorted. "Do you know, Black Queen? What it is he's tiptoeing around?"

"No," I admitted.

I had suspicions, though. Rape and torture highest among them. What sparse details we'd found of how the Wicked Enchanter had lived on the lawless outskirts of Procer had been a sickening read. The dark-eyed heroine glanced at me.

"Would it change anything, if you did?" the Red Axe asked.

I could have lied. But I was going to see her killed, one way or another, and so part of me felt like I owed her the truth.

"No," I repeated.

To my surprise, she smiled. As if obscurely proud or pleased.

"You're a cold hand, aren't you?" the heroine said. "The kind ones, like Prince here, they go all soft-touched the moment rape's even hinted at."

"You are a tragedy, Red Axe," I honestly said, "but hundreds of those come across my desk every day. Even a bleeding heart eventually bleeds dry."

And, truth be told, I'd started with a lot less blood in mine than most. The jury was still out on whether or not that'd been for the best, in the greater scheme of things.

"The Wicked Enchanter was a monster," the heroine said. "The details of it don't matter, save that what he got he deserved a hundred times over."

"If you'd decided to kill him the heartbeat the Truce was over, I would have looked away and covered my ears," I said, meaning every word. "But you didn't wait, and you took a swing at more than just the Enchanter."

"I'm not a child, Black Queen," the Red Axe said. "You don't need to take me by the hand and lead me down the path to where this is headed. I knew before I ever raised my blade how this was all going to end."

"This wasn't justice," Prince Frederic quietly said. "It was just blood, and many more lives might be lost because of it."

"You're guiltier than she is," the Red Axe said. "She's not supposed to be better than this, Kingfisher Prince. You are."

"And you?" the Prince of Brus replied. "Are you not supposed to be better than this as well, Chosen?"

"I give my life for what I believe," the heroine said. "What more is there left to squeeze out of me? I am not the one baring steel in the defense of the indefensible."

"It is defensible," I said. "Just not to you."

I was not bitter of that. How could I be? No, instead some part of me wondered if this was what the Grey Pilgrim had felt like, that day he'd looked at me and called me the culmination of old sins come back to haunt Calernia. If I was the punishment of the apathy and pettiness of the west when Callow fell, then was this woman not my own for the practical brutality lying behind the ideals of the Truce and Terms? I could not be angry or bitter, no, not when this was richly deserved.

"Don't-" she began.

"I won't take you by the hand, like you insisted, so forgive my bluntness," I calmly interrupted. "If we don't extend the amnesty part of the Truce to animals like the Wicked Enchanter, we lose Named. Those who have skeletons in their closet, who'll wonder if maybe their sins will be enough to get them the noose instead of the Truce should they come out of the woodworks. And most of those will be of mine, but there'll be some of your end of the Book too – those on the fringe, who learned to love striking at evil just a little too much. And even more costly than the lost champions, it'd mean the reliable Named would be up north, fighting the dead, while the radicals would be down south with no one left to handle them."

I breathed out and began to resist the urge to spit to the side before quelling that reflex and going through with it. It was not a pretty habit, but then nothing about this was pretty. It was blood on cogs, exactly like she'd accused.

"It's an ugly truth, and bare of morality, but in the end getting you a semblance of justice would have simply cost the war effort *too much*," I said. "I'd apologize, but I knew there would be people like you when I began to head down this road. I did it anyway."

I couldn't fix the world, in the end. Even if I had the power to shape it as I willed, I knew my own limitations well enough to be aware I'd likely do as much harm as good. Yet the Truce and Terms, for all their occasional dip into brutality, they *worked*. We'd gathered nearly seventy Named now, heroes and villains and those circumstance could cast as either. Near seventy Named, pointed at the great enemy to the north. Not even the First Crusade, when all of Calernia had risen to topple Triumphant, had fielded so many of our kind. It had not been painless or bloodless and certainly not without sweat, and neither I would not pretend that the system was without flaws, but Merciless Gods

it *worked*. If these were kinder times, I hoped I would have been kinder as well, that what I'd built would not have been so harsh.

But there were not kind times, and I could not be more than I was. It was either the Truce and Terms or rolling the dice on the annihilation of life on Calernia.

"I don't want an apology," the Red Axe said. "I want all these swords and oaths to be defending something worth defending. You spawned a monster that cares nothing for the past and looks hungrily at the future, Black Queen. Maybe it was the best you could, for all your famous cleverness."

She laughed, the sound of it bleak to my ear.

"So think of me as the voice Creation uses to say that this is not *good enough*," the prisoner said. "Your Truce and Terms will break, and you'll either do better or be cast aside."

Just another hero, lighting a torch and declaring it wasn't enough without ever offering another way. There was an echo of so many I'd faced in that voice, in that castigation. The Lone Swordsman, willing to make our home a wasteland so land as it was our own banner flying above it. The Grey Pilgrim, willing to choose war over peace because it wasn't the peace he'd wanted. The Saint of Swords, eyes hard as she decided to risk the death of all Iserre rather than compromise. I'd heard this refrain before, sung by different voices or with different words.

I'd won against this many a time, and I would again.

"We're not that special, you know," I said. "Named. In the right place at the right time we're able to do things that no one else could do, it's true, but we don't matter as much as we like to think."

The Prince of Brus breathed out sharply. He was Alamans, and well-taught, so he grasped my meaning before the other.

"The Truce will hold," I said. "The Terms will hold. If they were hated, if we were facing anyone else, it might be that enough wounds would kill them. But that's not the world we live in, Red Axe. They'll hold, if only because there are simply too many people that want them to."

And I believed that, I genuinely did. Something fragile, without a proper foundation or results to point at? A mess like the one ahead would break it, sure as dawn, even if everyone was trying to keep things together. But I had bartered away kindness for sturdiness, and so my creation would withstand the storm. Some dangers were born of the same strength that allowed you to beat them back, weren't they? Creation's sense of humour had not grown any less vicious as I aged.

"You will try," the Red Axe said, and the calm certainty in her eyes was troubling. "You will fail."

I met her eyes, for a moment, and wondered what to say. I would give no apology, for any I might offer would be meaningless.

"It'll be quick," I said. "That much, at least, I can promise."

I left, after, sensing that neither of us had anything left to say.

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The Prince of Brus stayed in the cell after my departure and I was not in a mood to wait for him. My leg was starting to pain me again, an unhappy turn, so I ambled off towards the Alcazar and counted on my slow gait being enough to ensure he'd catch up to me if he wanted to. He did so, though after long enough I'd come to believe we would be parting ways. I half-heartedly went through the usual courtesies after he joined me.

"There was little change after your departure," the Kingfisher Prince told me. "She tired of speaking to me quickly."

I grunted, noncommittal.

"It is a useful conversation to have had," I said. "I thank you for the opportunity."

"I can take pleasure in having provided that, if not the outcome of the journey," the fair-haired man said. "Have the Red Axe's words informed your opinion on other matters?"

A very polite way to ask if I was more open to taking Cordelia's offer of pushing through the Accords in exchange for ceding jurisdiction over this particular Named. Which actually seemed halfway possible, now, considering the Red Axe had tried to renounce any rights she might have under the Terms in front of a credible witness. It was a more than decent excuse to throw her at Procer, were I so inclined, though I suspected Hanno would see it otherwise. Which was why Hasenbach wanted me on her side in the first place, when it came down to it. Officially there were three crowned heads in the Grand Alliance: the First Prince of Procer, the Holy Seljun of Levant and the Queen of Callow. If she got me in on her side, not only was she securing Below's side of the Terms but also ensuring that whoever ended up speaking for the Dominion in this would be very reluctant to side against two thirds of the alliance.

"It has," I simply said.

He left it at that, as I'd thought he would. It'd be uncouth to try to press me for a quick answer on so delicate a matter.

"So what part of that was it that you wanted me to see, in specific?" I idly asked.

He did not look surprised, and though he did not deny what I'd said neither did he look abashed.

"It might be argued, given her enmity to the Truce and Terms, that she was never really a signatory," the Kingfisher Prince simply said.

Ah, clever man. If she'd been an enemy from the start, then she was not under anyone's protection. Procer would be free to have at her. It was still a relatively shaky excuse, to my eye, but before I'd met with the Red Axe I probably would have dismissed it outright. He'd read that correctly.

"To my knowledge, you never spoke with her in depth," I said.

I'd sent him to ensure her safety during the assault on the Arsenal but fleeing clandestinely through corridors was not the time for the sort of conversation that would have allowed him a solid read on her. I'd not been made aware of any visit to her since, either, and considering my orders to the guards I would have known within a quarter hour of such an attempt at most.

"I had much time to think, while recuperating," Prince Frederic said. "If she were Damned, I would have noticed. I have seen enough Named I am certain of this. Yet she was not, and still attacked me. There was a likely reason for that, given what I know of her past."

Meaning he'd deduced her antipathy was towards the Terms before we ever set foot in that room. Competence was attractive, I reluctantly admitted to myself. Especially so in attractive people. My eyes narrowed as I fit another set of details together.

"That's why you don't want to press charges under the Terms," I slowly said. "You don't believe she was actually trying to kill you."

"In a sense," the prince said. "Regardless of whether my death was meant or not, or perhaps even hers, it was not Frederic Goethal she struck. It might have been a signatory of the Terms or a prince of the blood, but for all that she has she my blood I cannot truly consider her an enemy."

"All three of those people you mentioned happen to live in the same body," I drily pointed out. "I suppose they are all of a forgiving temperament."

"I am not a saint, Queen Catherine," Prince Frederic quietly said. "I am not pleased to have been attacked by someone I was

risking life and limb to save. Yet, knowing what I know of why this came to pass, I cannot in good conscience seek her death for it. I am not blind to the nature of some of those who have been protected by the Truce and Terms, or the injustice matching the expedience of enlisting their service."

"You're not an officer of the Terms," I said. "Or one of their architects. You bear no responsibility there."

"I have chosen to uphold the Terms, to participate in them, and so bear a personal responsibility," the prince replied, shaking his head.

It was torturous chain of logic, as far as I was concerned, but not entirely senseless. A little to labyrinthine, though, for the amount of passion he'd been speaking with all this time. I suspected that under all the talk of conscience and responsibility, the truth was that Frederic Goethal's heroic hindbrain believed the Red Axe was at least a little right about all this. That would make it an utterly repulsive notion to him to ask for her death, even when it might be convenient. Perhaps even *more* because it'd be convenient, I mused. Where he'd be standing, it was that sort of liberties taken with justice that would have started this mess in the first place.

"I've already given my opinion of this," I said. "I doubt you've forgotten it."

"It would not dare, Your Majesty," the blue-eyed man said, a tad ruefully.

We'd gotten into the Alcazar as we talked without my even noticing, nearer to the heart of the section than my rooms but not all that far. That sudden realization had me closing my mouth, eyeing the pretty prince from the side. It wouldn't even be particularly suspect, I thought, to invite him into my rooms. Which were warded. Private. The kind of place where I'd be able to take my time peeling him out of those clothes and get at the much more interesting body beneath them. I'd not said anything, but the Prince of Brus caught the corner of my gaze and his steps stuttered for the barest fraction of a moment. Without a word being spoken either side, my blood quickened again. It wasn't a very good idea, I reminded myself

It might turn out to be a *thoroughly enjoyable* idea, though.

I glanced at his face and found a conflict I suspected might not be too different in nature from mine. There were quite a few temptations I considered myself apt in dealing with, more than most at least, but this sort of thing wasn't one of them. I saw movement from the corner of my eye, dark robes and a long stride, and to my relief and dismay – more dismay than relief, honesty

compelled me to admit – I found Hierophant headed towards us with intent too obvious to be mistaken.

“It appears I have other claims on my time,” I said.

“I can only look forward to our next meeting then, my queen,” Prince Frederic replied.

Without my being entirely sure how it happened, I found my hand being kissed as smoldering blue eyes looked up at me. *Fuck*, I thought even as he retreated. All right, so I was probably going to end up sleeping with Frederic Goethal. I just needed to be smart in going about it, and maybe not do it too much. I could probably handle that. I wasn’t looking for anything serious and he was headed back to Twilight’s Pass before long anyway, so really you might even say I was being responsible about this.

“Catherine?” Masego said, interrupting my thoughts.

“Zeze?” I replied.

“Is there a particular reason you are looking at this man?”

I pondered that for a moment.

“None you’d enjoy hearing about,” I honestly replied. “I take it you’re looking for me?”

It was only then I took a longer look at him, and noticed how visibly exhausted he was. Physically, anyway. There was a fervour burning in him I’d long learned to recognize as him reaching a particularly interesting stretch of his research.

“I was,” Masego said, then lowered his voice. “I did it, Catherine.”

I cocked an eyebrow.

“Did what?”

“I found the crown of Autumn,” Hierophant grinned.

Chapter 30: Quarters

“Admittedly, it was my fault for not specifying the flying fortress had to be able to fly in directions other than up. Oh, it can fly down as well? Splendid. Guards, drag the Lord Warlock beneath my fortress. It’d be a shame not to use it at least once.”

– Dread Emperor Inimical, the Miser

“Walk me through it,” I said, then added, “metaphorically speaking.”

Masego's mouth snapped shut. His quarters were larger than I'd expected, but I was rather familiar with the way it got filled from our years together. It was unusual, by Wasteland standards. Given how sorcery tended to come with some degree of wealth and influence, at least in Praes, the rooms of most mages I'd seen tended to be tasteful and well-furnished. Many even had a corner set aside to receive guests and a few impressive-looking magical trinkets to impress the uninitiated. Research or actual practice of sorcery would take place not there but in workshops and mage towers, behind heavy wards and away from the prying eyes of rivals. Masego, on the other hand, had never seen sorcery as something he *practiced*. He was a mage first and foremost, even without his magic, so in his mind there was nothing to separate his living quarters from a workshop. Our surroundings made that exceedingly clear.

Where my own quarters in the Arsenal had a parlour to entertain guests, he instead had a neat and well-organized library whose shelves went from floor to ceiling. A comfortable scribing desk – I'd actually seen cushions like this one's on Alcazar furniture and the red didn't match the wood, so Indrani had probably stolen it – with enough leg room for him to sit reading without feeling cramped was the only concession to this being somewhere actually lived in. The same couldn't be said of the larger room deeper in, where I found the mixture of lazy chaos and almost rigid orderliness to be a nostalgic sight: like his tents out on campaign, or his rooms in Laure. While dirty clothes, plates with half-eaten meals on them and the blade cleaning kit Hakram had gifted Indrani a few years back had been strewn around without a care, it actually only served to contrast with the parts Zeze did care to keep clean.

Like a long table with half a dozen leather-bound manuscripts, the sole open one revealing Masego's finicky calligraphy in ink, also boasting several reference books I dimly recognized from my continuing lessons on sorcery with Akua. All were laden with bookmarks, though none more so than the heavy tome titled *Metaphysics of Realms* from some ancient Warlock by the name of Olowe. Stacked scrolls and carefully folded parchments along with a nice leather armchair told me this was likely where Zeze sat to work, and there was not a single crumb or speck of dust on that table to be found. Another nook looked like a small alchemy lab, another like an enchanting table and yet another was covered in glass domes constraining pulsing luminous mushrooms. Experiments, I rather hoped. Around those islands of order even the wood shavings from the wooden carvings Indrani had carelessly sown around everywhere else seemed reluctant to enter.

I wouldn't but it above Masego to have warded them.

The large bed in the corner, which evidently neither he nor Indrani had bothered to make, seemed to have been placed there

almost like an afterthought – fitted in there after the important stuff had been, half-heartedly wedged in where there was still room. My suspicions that he might have forgot to put actual furniture in there at first were deepened by the way the dressers were on opposite sides of the room and the closet was awkwardly close to a cupboard opening the opposite way. It went from suspicion to standing assumption when I noticed that the small table where they ate meals – by the amount of dirty plates – was clearly Archer's work by the look of the carvings. Zeze was not particularly fond of tapestries, so I assumed the few hung on the walls were there at Indrani's addition, but the sheer amount of magelights and candles was all him. Beautiful and elaborate carpets clearly from the Wasteland – no one wove those quite like the Taghreb – added a splash of colour that livened up the room into a place where it might actually be pleasant to live.

Yet it was a small room behind all this where we stood, though, behind a steel door warded tightly so none of the influences from the other parts of his quarters could drift in and contaminate the workings. Here the walls were bare stone and even the tables and chairs polished granite, with only his work on the Quartered Seasons breaking up the stony monotony. Half a dozen copper boxes with glass lids and water held in crystal spheres – an improvement on the traditional scrying bowl, though significantly more fragile – revealed shifting colourful shapes from places beyond Creation, while on the left wall a great slate covered in markings and formulas depicting the secrets that the Hierophant had successfully teased out of the Pattern. I'd been invited to sit on one of the granite chairs but instead elected to stand at his side, looking at the slate.

I gestured for Hierophant to begin, and with sharp nod he moved closer to the slate. He found a corner of it without writing, then paused and turned towards me. With his full body not, just his eyes, which got my attention.

"I will begin by noting that the Hunted Magician's information was the definitive factor in this success," Masego said.

My brow rose. I'd suspected that it'd be useful stuff, but this was much stronger praise than I'd anticipated. Hierophant was in no way shy about claiming intellectual successes when he believed himself their author, and to this day still utterly disinterested with politics, so if he was talking up the Magician then every word spoken was true.

"I hear he's come across some trouble under the Terms?" Masego continued.

"He worked with the Bard, among other things," I said. "I'm not eager to press for an execution, given his uses, but letting him off with a slap on the wrist isn't in the cards."

"I've little interest in those matters," Masego admitted. "But since you told me he gave what he knew as part of an arrangement for leniency, I'll specify that his information saved me possibly literal years of work. I was looking in entirely the wrong places."

That'd weigh on the scales, though less than Zeze might expect. The way I saw it, the Hunted Magician couldn't be allowed to *buy* his way out of consequences no matter what he offered up. All that he floated us and ended up panning out, though, should be put together as a case for why certain punishments should be sought instead of others.

"I'll pass that along to his tribunal," I said. "And I might need you to put it in writing at some point."

He nodded.

"Duly noted."

From the look on his face, he was already tossing the entire matter into the pile of things he felt no particular need to remember. To my eye it was still an improvement that he'd bothered to speak to the subject at all instead of simply assuming I'd handle it, so if anything I was rather pleased.

"The crux of the matter is a question that concerns one of the few commendable books on sorcery to come out of the Principate, Madeline de Jolicoeur's work *'Essences of the Fey'*," Masego said, charmingly taken by his subject.

He drew a small circle on the slate, his long fingers deft. It was always heartwarming to see him genuinely in his element. I frowned a heartbeat later, though.

"I'm pretty sure I've heard that name before," I told him.

Where? Obviously it was from Proceran history, but my studies of that had been rather skewed. I'd focused on the major wars and turning points, along with Cordelia Hasenbach's rise and reign. Considering the sheer size of the Principate, even though the state hadn't even existed for half the time Callow had that still meant a staggering number of things would have slipped through the cracks of my learning.

"I believe she was also known by her contemporaries as the Fey Enchantress," Masego said.

Ah, *her*. Leave it to Zeze to primarily remember the villainess that'd taken over most of Cantal and Iserre only to fail at toppling Salia and the Highest Assembly for her apparently impressive magical research.

"Lady Madeline was part fae herself, and familiar with the Courts of Arcadia, which eventually led her to ask the question of what happens when fae are killed," Masego said. "Her work was the first to suggest that fae cannot truly die, and that the changing of the seasons is the mechanism through which the Courts renew themselves."

"So fae don't die," I said. "You told me that several times in the past, and I've seen the proof of it myself. What's useful about this?"

"When the physical body of a fae is slain, they are not destroyed," Masego said. "We know their essence continues to exist, as it will be spun anew into another fae come the changing of seasons. Where, then, does that essence go?"

Huh. I'd not considered that, actually. Fairies didn't have souls, so it wasn't like they'd pass into beyond and then be resurrected when they were needed by their endless cycle again.

"It could lapse back to the crown of their respective court," I eventually said. "Some fae are dukes one cycle and princes another, so we know there's a variance in power to some extent. It might be the 'crown' is a system for apportioning that power into different fae."

Masego turned burning eyes towards me, noticeable even under the eyecloth.

"Akua has been very good for you," he seriously said.

Words to make half of Callow faint in rage, but I decided to let him finish his thought before settling on a reaction.

"You've always been clever," Zeze continued, "but now your instincts are grounded in knowledge. I am glad she has been tutoring you, even if your closeness makes Vivienne unhappy."

"More than just Vivienne," I reminded him, and left it at that.

He shrugged, unconcerned with the broader ramifications. Most days I wished I could be as well, given how much simpler it'd make my life.

"A return to the crown was my first theory as well," Hierophant told me. "Which led to the creation of the copper eyes. Through a process you are not educated enough to understand even if I explain, I created power that would behave similarly to Spring or Autumn and released it in different places with the aim of tracing it back to the crowns."

This part I'd known about, though not the reasoning behind it. The 'copper eyes', the scrying boxes in the room with us, were

meant to follow the power he was releasing into the wilds and so find the location of the crowns. They were linked to measuring devices that'd been put out in different layers of Creation and adjoining realms, with great difficulty, but for all the trouble last I'd heard that avenue had proved to be something of a dead end.

"It didn't work, though," I said.

"It worked perfectly," Masego contradicted. "It simply found nothing. My theory when facing those results was that I was simply not releasing the power in the correct places, which was not improbable given the size of Arcadia alone – much less the full spectrum of the search."

"So what changed?" I asked.

"To understand that, first consider a more recent theory introduced by my own father," Masego said, drawing a second circle on the slate. "Namely, that all of Arcadia – even the fae themselves – are of the same fundamental matter, with the differences between a stone and a duchess being essentially cosmetic. Father suggested that fae cannot truly die not because of an effective immortality of essence, but instead because they are not truly alive."

He spoke of Warlock with a tinge of wistfulness, but the grief had visibly faded. I wasn't too surprised. When the Dead King wasn't riding in the back of his head, Masego actually tended deal with his emotions better than most of the Woe. I set that aside and considered his actual words instead, the theory the Sovereign of the Red Skies had put forward. I wasn't quite sure I bought it, not after some of the things I'd seen.

"If the fae were entirely self-contained in their story cycles, I'd agree with that," I noted. "But that theory doesn't explain Larat."

Who had walked away from kingship Twilight and become something else. If fae were not more thinking than a trebuchet or a water wheel, merely more complex, how could his actions be explained?

"A fascinating contradiction," Masego warmly agreed. "Are Larat and your former Wild Hunt then the first fae to have ever lived, or by virtue of living do they cease being fae at all?"

"Which links to Quartered Seasons how?" I asked.

"It doesn't," Hierophant replied without missing a beat. "I simply find it a gripping mystery."

I, uh, should have seen that coming. Honestly it was a sign of how engaged he was with this subject that he'd only ended up going down a side path the once.

"Returning to the theoretical framework," Masego happily said, "if we believe both Lady Madeline and Father we are led to a particular state of affairs. Fae are not destroyed when their body is slain, return cyclically, and are not fundamentally distinguishable from the rest of Arcadia."

My eyes narrowed.

"A return to the earth," I said. "That's what you're getting at. Like Arcadia itself is a pool of water, and when they 'die' the water just returns to the pool."

"Precisely," Hierophant grinned. "From there I draw not on the work of others but on my own, if you'll forgive the intellectual vanity."

"I'll magnanimously deign to do so," I replied.

He eyed me sideways, knowing there'd been sarcasm in that sentence but with little interest in deciphering where and why. He still drew a third circle, below and in between the first two.

"My own Quartered Seasons theory was built on the back of the two older theories I've introduced you to," Masego said. "Madeline de Jolicoeur suggested that the changing of seasons was a way for the courts to renew themselves, but I would venture to go further. The existence of the seasons themselves is a mechanism for that very purpose, allowing a set of two seasons to be active while the other two become ambient and begin condensing into their coming shape. Your own vision, Catherine, made it clear that the transitions between seasons were not instantaneous. Given Arcadia's otherwise loose accord with creational laws, there must be a mechanical reason for this to be so."

"You're losing me," I admitted. "I thought that your theory was about the separation between a court's 'crown' and its 'power'."

"It is," Masego said. "Think of Arcadia as the pool of water you mentioned."

He drew a large circle in the centre of the space.

"Each Court is, for lack of a better term, a smaller pond that will be filled through a canal at regular intervals."

His hand moved again, depicting four lines leading out of the large circle and leading into four smaller circles.

"All power is limited," Hierophant stated, idly filling in the large circle with 'water'. "I believe that, for reasons of

stability and coherence, only two ponds can ever be safely filled from the pool's water. That leaves two ponds' worth of power returned to ambient Arcadia, slowly shaping themselves into the coming seasons. If all four ponds are filled..."

"The pool would be empty," I frowned. "And so Arcadia would grow thin. That seems dangerous."

"It would be, which is why I believe a deeper mechanism ensures that only two ponds can be full at a time," Masego said. "The decay in victory of Winter or Summer until they become Spring and Autumn, which you saw in vision, would be the visible part of that mechanism in action."

"So the water is the power, that I get," I said. "That still leaves out the crowns."

He nodded, pleased, and methodically drew little crowns above each of the four smaller circles, the 'ponds'.

"The crowns are, in effect, simply the shape of the pond the water is poured into," Masego said. "Given the cosmic scope of these 'waters', however, this had still made them godheads in every meaningful sense."

I watched the slate board, fingers clenching and unclenching. He'd not kept talking, which meant he'd given me the rules of this as he knew them. It also meant that I might be able to figure it out, at least in part. It was a sloppy habit to have all this explained to me all the time, one that might come back to bite me in the future, so I forced myself to think.

"When the King of Winter and the Queen of Summer wed," I said, "neither of them lost their crown. They didn't stop being royalty, just became the royalty of something new."

"Correct," Masego said.

He drew a line through two of the found crowns. On opposite ends of the pool, as Hierophant was nothing if not precise even in his doodles.

"But I know they didn't get to keep the power of Winter, because I got my hands on it," I said. "And then Sve Noc ate it, to stabilize the Night into something that won't destroy their entire species if it collapses."

He drew a line through one of ponds already bereft of a crown.

"I am still uncertain whether the lack of corresponding crown to go with the power you inherited is what kept you largely sane or was instead the very reason for your troubles with principle alienation," Masego admitted. "Regardless, it is undoubtedly why

you were only ever able to command but the barest fraction of that power."

"If your 'deeper mechanism' was working right, when the newborn Court of Arcadia Resplendent was formed there would have been two ponds back in the pool," I slowly said. "The power of Spring and Autumn."

His lips quirked. I'd underestimated how much and how long he'd been wanting to talk to someone about this, I thought. The secrecy meant neither of us had brought in even the Woe fully, though Hakram knew some things and no doubt Indrani had gone looking through everybody's papers as was her wont. Masego drew lines through two ponds, the same who still had their crowns.

"Given that in this state their very purpose is to be shaped anew for a coming cycle, it would explain the ease by which this unprecedented Court of Arcadia Resplendent was formed," Masego agreed. "And we look at two crowns' worth of control for two ponds' worth of power, which would lead to a highly stable arrangement explaining why we've not heard of collapse in Arcadia since."

"Winter's power went into Night," I said. "Which means it has to be Summer that went into Twilight, it's the only pond of power that was still free. Except we had no call on that power, Zeze."

"We did not," Hierophant agreed. "Yet you struck a bargain with the Prince of Nightfall, who did."

What I'd promised him was seven mortal crowns and one, though, and while we'd undeniably both been at war with Summer at the time neither of us had held a right to its power. Although hadn't the imprisoned Princess of High Noon gone spare when I'd told her about the bargain with Larat? She must have seen something looming on the horizon even that far back.

"I can't see how we got our hands on it, even then," I admitted.

"Though I cannot be certain, I believe it to have been a matter of blind mechanics having worked to our advantaged," Masego said. "Larat was fae, and so his ritualized apotheosis called to power of a fae nature. It made the water go down the canal, so speak, and there was only one pond's worth of water left to flow."

"And the seven crowns and one?" I asked.

"When trying to force such a powerful mechanism to work, some manner of power must be spent," Hierophant suggested. "It is telling that the same fae who escaped the foundation of united Arcadia asked for this specific bounty, among all those that could be asked."

That many crowns would have a weight to them, undeniably. Was that what the Princess of High Noon had seen and panicked about? Not necessarily that Larat would eventually use up the very stuff of Summer, I doubted even fae could be that farsighted, but that he was aiming to make a Court of his own. It fit, I had to admit. If there was a recipe to make a Court, it made sense that royalty on both sides of the fence would be at least vaguely aware of it.

"So that leaves the crowns of Spring and Autumn up for grabs, like we thought," I said. "Where were they, that the Hunted Magician was able to help you – wait, actually, what about the fae we fought here in the Arsenal?"

My brow knotted. I'd almost forgotten those, but they were a stick in the wheel of what had been explained to me so far.

"They were Autumn," I said. "There shouldn't be an Autumn left, Masego, by your theory."

"The answer to this was obtained by Roland, though unknowingly on his part," Hierophant said. "He captured alive one of the fae, whose physical body it turns out we've destroyed before. The Duke of Green Orchards, who was slain in Dormer, though he now goes by Count of Green Apples."

So I'd not been wrong, I thought, when I'd noticed an eerie similarity.

"I saw him," I admitted. "Noticed his face. So you're saying all those fae that attacked the Arsenal are, what, salvaged corpses?"

"Those entities whose bodies were slain can never be made anew with a new Winter or Summer, as there will never again *be* either of these," Masego said. "That leaves them existing, yet purposeless. Some must have bound themselves to the crown of Autumn to acquire that purpose. There will be some of other natures, kept into existence by outside ties like contracts or debts, but I imagine much of the roster will be those killed in the Arcadian Campaign. For all those that anchored themselves to Autumn or Spring, I expect ten times as many went wild and are now partaking of sundry powers on Creation or elsewhere to sustain their existence."

The Prince of Falling Leaves, then would have continued existing *because* of the Hunted Magician's unpaid debt. That had a sharp little irony to it I could not help but find amusing – that man really was prone to shooting himself in the foot, wasn't he? Actually, now that I was considering this, was my pact for the crowns with the Prince of Nightfall what'd allowed him not to become one of the subject princes of Arcadia in the first place? *Larat*, I thought with reluctant admiration. *You cleverest of foxes.*

"So fae fell through the cracks of our mess and now suckle at whatever they can find, including Autumn," I summarized.

That sounded like it'd be an issue in the long term, fae loose in the world and grown hungry, but right now we had more pressing cats to skin. And it was now occurring to me that if the dead fae from my old campaign were excluded from the newborn Court that'd followed it, then most of Winter and Summer's royalty had been removed. The very same kind of entities that might be rivals for whoever sat the newborn thrones.

Somewhere, I suspected, the creature that had once been the King of Winter was smiling.

"More or less," Masego agreed. "And to answer the question you never finished asking, what the Hunted Magician provided was not exactly a location. There is, if you'll forgive the metaphor, no buried treasure to unearth. That was what he clarified for me, that I could not find a crown because in a very real sense it does not currently exist. What he gave us is a set of circumstances that will coalesce the crown of Autumn into being. More specifically, a ritual to be used in a particular place and alignment."

"So when you said you found the crown of Autumn," I leadingly said.

"An artistic flourish," Masego proudly said. "I have merely confirmed the ritual will function and located an appropriate ritual site and date."

I let out a noise of appreciation.

"Well done," I said. "What kind of a timeline are we looking at?"

Considering how much about the fae had to do with seasons, I'd guess somewhere around a year. Maybe the autumn solstice or something else along those lines.

"Thirty-one days," Hierophant said.

I blinked in surprise, lapsing into a stunned silence.

"I could make the attempt tomorrow," Masego said, misinterpreting the reason for my quiet, "but to both travel and prepare for the ritual over so small a span would significantly increase the chances of failure."

"That..." I began, almost at a loss for words. "That changes things. The location, the resources you need, it's all set?"

"I'll have to significantly empty the Arsenal reserves of gems and precious metals as well as require of the services of at least two hundred mages – three hundred would be more

comfortable, it would allow for replacements and adjustments – but in principle all needed is at hand,” Masego said.

Noticing my surprise, he smiled.

“You have helped create one of the grandest magical sites of learning and magic on Calernia, Catherine,” he said. “Do not then be surprised that it serves that purpose with distinction.”

I coughed, slightly embarrassed.

“The ritual site itself will be familiar to you, as the Princes’ Graveyard was fought near it,” he continued.

“The Mavian prayers on the hill?” I asked.

“Indeed,” Masego said. “There are other locations with perhaps more precise alignments, but this one benefits from being the seat of a permanent Twilight gate. The logistical benefits are obvious.”

I could definitely believe that tumulus would work as a ritual site, at least. I still remembered walking the tall raised stones and feeling the echoes of long-faded might, the call they’d made to the last wisps of fae power in me.

“The ritual could fail,” I said.

“All rituals can fail,” Masego pointed out.

“Allow me to rephrase that,” I said. “If the ritual fails, what are the consequences?”

“The ritual site will be obliterated, a significant portion of the mages involved will die or go mad, the fabric of Creation on a regional scale will be weakened for several centuries,” Hierophant calmly listed.

My fingers clenched. That was not negligible losses.

“The Twilight gate?” I made myself ask.

“Three in five odds of withstanding the damages and keeping full functionality,” Masego said. “No chance of destruction, or that partial functionality will not remain. We did not craft a fragile artefact, Catherine.”

Considering the sheer amount of Night we’d wielded that day and the way he’d come into an aspect halfway through, I was not inclined to doubt him.

“Odds of success?” I pressed.

"Tomorrow, perhaps one in five," Hierophant mused. "Likely a little less. By my suggested timeline, I'd say somewhere between seven and eight in ten. Closer to eight, by my calculations."

"If we wait longer can you bump that up?" I asked.

He frowned, staying silent for a long moment.

"With another two months, perhaps a little over eight," Masego finally said. "With a full contingent of Wasteland mages and a month to teach them we could near nine in ten, though I believe that Dread Empress Malicia might be disinclined to lend us these."

By the tone of his voice, that was very petty of her. I suppressed a smile. Indeed, how dare international politics and all these wars get in the way of one of the great magical feats of the century?

"I'm currently inclined to wait the three months and get all the sureties we can," I said. "But I'll discuss it with our allies, since Quartered Seasons is starting to become a genuine war asset."

If nothing else, having this kind of a tool in our pocket would greatly strengthen the case of those commanders among the Grand Alliance who favoured the defensive strategy to this war. Princess Rozala and Prince Otto Reitzenberg had been arguing from the start that so long as we held our defensible borders, time would be on our side – either because of the amount of Named we'd accrue, or because the Arsenal would eventually produce a weapon capable of turning around the war on a strategic scale. The crown of Autumn might just qualify, since while it had no real use against field armies it could potentially allow us to deal with Neshamah himself. Not destroy him, mind you, that'd been what the Severance was for, but neutering him as a threat was more important than outright destruction.

"Assuming you successfully coalesce the crown," I said, "will it be a physical artefact?"

Masego nodded.

"One not unlike the crown of Twilight when it was formed," he said. "Though the strength of the godhead is in the concept and not the material."

"And once we have the physical artefact," I said, "you can begin shaping it."

"I've had the appropriate workshop for the work built in the Arsenal for some time, though it is currently sealed," Hierophant said. "It is difficult to estimate how long it would take me to

shape the godhead, as even the Dead King's work in Keter bears only passing similarities for me to draw on. It is safe to assume at least several months."

I hummed. We wouldn't need the crown to take back Hainaut, anyhow, which in my opinion was a prerequisite to taking a swing at Keter itself. We simply couldn't afford to thin land defences against his armies the way we'd need to in order to make a serious crack at the Crown of the Dead, the risk of collapse was too high. Pushing Keter back beyond the lakes would allow us to dig in, though, and muster the armies properly for an assault on the Hidden Horror's capital next spring or summer.

"We can afford that," I said. "Especially if it wins us the war, which it will if we can make him lose control over the undead."

That was, after all, what lay at the very heart of Quartered Seasons. Something like the Severance, an offensive artefact, it could be resisted. Which was why we wouldn't be attacking the Dead King, we'd be *giving* him the crown – not in a way he could refuse, but still as a gift of godhead. That'd slip right through the overwhelming majority of his defences, by Masego's reckoning, and Hierophant had spent most of the year with Neshamah riding in the back of his head. He knew the Dead King, understood him in ways most of us could only dimly grasp. The trick was that we wouldn't just be tossing him the crown of Autumn, Hierophant would be shaping it first. It had to remain powerful, or it'd wiggle out of the groove of being a gift, but we'd get to choose what power was given. And what strictures accompanied it, of course, because the mantle of godhood could hardly come without costs.

I was more than comfortable making the Dead King physically indestructible if that power came at the expense of, say, *his ability to command the dead*.

I jolted myself out of my thoughts, since there still remained a question I'd forgotten to ask.

"Spring's crown will still be out there," I said. "That strikes me as a dangerous thing to leave simply lying around."

Not the highest priority, but given my personal role in shattering the old order of Arcadia it'd be irresponsible to simply hide my head in the sand when it came to Spring.

"I agree," Hierophant calmly said. "And since we might not have need of it for the war efforts, I've been considering how else it might be used."

My lips thinned. I knew where that was headed. It wasn't like Masego had ever made it a secret that he still intended on apotheosis, though he'd set those pursuits aside temporarily in

deference to the horrors currently trying to sweep over the continent.

"I'm not sure I have the pull to allow you to get your hands on that," I admitted. "Not after that mess in Iserre before the peace. I've been having trouble with heroes as well, so to be frank your pursuing godhood might end up the proverbial match in the munitions warehouse."

"I believe that power is even less in your hands that you know, Catherine," Hierophant said. "I attempted to narrow down possible ritual locations for Spring's crown, so that I might test them for essence resonance, but out of the five locations I scried three repelled my spell."

I breathed in sharply. While Masego might not currently have direct access to the Observatory, arguably the finest scrying facility in existence bar none, he was still one of the finest living practitioners of that art and sitting on a treasure trove of resources. There weren't a lot of people, of defences, that could just *repel* him.

"The Dead King?" I asked, tone gone grim.

If Neshamah got his hands on a godhead, he'd make anything we might make out of one look like child's play.

"No," Masego sad, shaking his head. "On the third attempt I was ready for the opposition and salvaged a glimpse before my scrying sphere was shattered. I'll show you."

Walking over to one of the granite tables, as I watched he opened a compartment and took out what appeared to be a small sphere of silver glittering with sorcery. His aspect pulsed and he wrested it out, weaving for my eyes an illusion. The background was unclear, though I thought a tall streak of grey might be stone and the muddled green perhaps a field, but the forefront was crisp. A tall, slender and inhuman shape turned and watched with too-large eyes. It did not move, but the spell broke less than a heartbeat later. Silence held the room for a moment before I let out a long sigh.

That, unfortunately, had been an elf.

Chapter 31: Pursuits

"The man who sleeps with virtue finds the bed has no room for a third."

– Proceran saying

"Fuck," I said.

Ever eloquent in times of trouble, that was me.

"I thought that might be your reaction," Masego noted.

I closed my eyes. Was there anything we could do about this? I wasn't exactly overjoyed at the prospect of the elves getting their paws on the crown of Spring, assuming they hadn't already. On the other hand, I couldn't think of anything the Grand Alliance needed less right now than picking a fight with a power as strong as the Golden Bloom. I didn't know anywhere near enough to be sure what to think about this. What did they want the crown for, how important was it to them? A decision on that scale couldn't be made without at least a solid guess at the answers to those questions, and it wouldn't be made by me alone anyway.

"Right," I said, opening my eyes. "I need you to keep digging into this, Hierophant. It's higher priority than Quartered Seasons, as least for the next few days."

The ritual wouldn't be happening anytime soon anyway: I doubted the First Prince would accept even the slightest unnecessary risk to the countryside of Procer. Not when the timeline to stacking the odds in our favour as much as possible was perfectly acceptable from a strategic view.

"There are limits to what I can accomplish," Masego said.

"I want you to find out if they already have the Spring crown," I said. "And at least check on the ritual sites, to guess at how much force they've actually deployed out there."

Likely on Proceran territory, too, not that elves tended to be particularly concerned with any borders save their own. But of I was going to have to break it to Cordelia Hasenbach that the Forever King had sent agents into the Principate, I'd prefer to at least like to have some estimates to offer her about how many of those there were.

"The latter I can assure, if not the former," Zeze said, pushing back one of his elaborate braids. "They're likely to resist my probing attempts, however."

The implied question there was, in essence, about how insistent he was allowed to be in the face of that resistance.

"Don't harm anyone," I said. "Try to avoid damage, if you can, and whatever you do avoid starting a fight. Other than that, you're free to use whatever means you want."

"It ought to be an interesting intellectual exercise, at least," Masego mused. "The nature of their defences is unique, which will force a degree of unorthodoxy to my approach."

"I'm sure you'll figure something out," I said, meaning every word.

I cleared my throat, after, hesitant to speak what I wanted to say.

"I don't need to tell you to stay safe, do I?" I eventually asked.

He smiled.

"I'll take precautions, Catherine, there is no need to worry," Masego said.

"We might have other ways to get to that information," I reminded him. "You, on the other hand, can't be replaced."

"I am fond of you as well, Cat," the blind man easily replied. "Now do be off. I'll not have you hovering about as I work, your presence alone is enough to disturb all my precision instruments."

Probably true, though that didn't mean that he wasn't just itching to get me out of here just so he could get started on the latest challenging task I'd presented him.

"Take care, Zeze," I quietly said.

To my surprise he placed a hand on my shoulder, if only fleetingly.

"And you as well," Masego seriously said. "Hakram is wounded but you are not alone. We are here if you need us."

I breathed out, since I was a grown woman and getting moist eyes over something this simple would be a little shameful. I left before another burst of that disarming earnestness could scrape me even more raw, returning to the cold halls of the Arsenal and the ever-increasing amount of troubles awaiting me.

—

When I went to relieve Indrani from her watch over Hakram's bedside it was past Noon Bell, so I returned her earlier kindness and brought a meal with me.

Pork with garlic sauce, a loaf of brown bread and a large saucer of some strange mix of oil, vinegar and olives. They were all Arlesite staples, the mixture in the saucer meant for the bread to be dipped in, and I'd grabbed a pair of apples to round the meal out. Archer was carefully carving an arrow when I entered, eyes on the wood and the knife in her hand carefully precise. Back in Callow this sort of work tended to be done out of logs with an eye to making many and quickly, but Indrani was rather

more discerning with her own arrows: she picked the branches herself, when she could, and saw to their carving personally. Considering the rarity of some of the woods she used, that was only to be expected. She tended to treat mass-made arrows with the same disdain Masego reserved for massed Legion sorcery, and for much the same reasons.

"I get to be served by a queen," Indrani bragged, even as I began unpacking the meal. "How many people can boast that, I wonder?"

Out of petty spite, I left her half of the meal on the table and only arranged mine on a plate. I offered her a pretty smile.

"Not you, for one," I sweetly said, and sat down with plate.

Huh, I'd been skeptical about the oil and vinegar but it was actually pretty good. Made the brown bread better than butter would have, for sure, and while I wouldn't trust Procerans to make a halfway decent stew they were admittedly good at roasts like the pork one.

"You're a terrible friend," Indrani complained, rising to her feet.

"You taught me well," I agreed.

She helped herself to her meal with a snort, the two of us settling comfortably in our seats. We were both hungry enough that conversation waited until we'd polished off our meals, though even as I tore into the pork I found my eyes drifting to Hakram's unconscious body. I missed him even more sharply now that I needed advice. Him and Akua, I was forced to admit, as I'd come to rely on the two of them quite a bit in Hainaut. Bringing Akua Sahelian into the Arsenal would have been ill-advised, though, and not just because it'd strip the Hainaut front of its sole high calibre spellcaster – it'd been as much the number of heroes awaiting here and the rulers I'd be meeting as the strategic considerations that'd guided my decision.

"You look glum again," Indrani said, licking the garlic sauce off her fingers.

"Quartered Seasons had a major breakthrough," I admitted. "But it's also looking very likely that the elves are trying for a fae crown."

She let out a lot whistle.

"A nasty people, the elves," Archer opined. "They never came after Ranger while I was in Refuge, but about a decade earlier a few of the Emerald Swords tried to ambush her in Bayeux."

The Emerald Swords, huh? Hadn't ever really given those any thought, to be honest. Their strength was quite literally legend, though there were rumoured to be no more than ten. Each was supposed to be worth a small army, the Forever King's blunt instruments in eradicating what he could not stand. They supposedly rarely left the Golden Bloom, like most elves.

"I don't know what they want the crown for, but it worries me," I admitted.

"Also irks you something fierce, I'd wager," Indrani smiled. "They're scavenging power they had no hand in laying low."

I did not answer, looking away. She wasn't wrong. That the Forever King thought he could sit out the war against the Dead King and use the chaos to go grabbing mantles of power while we were busy fighting for Calernia's survival was not endearing the man to me. If the elves had played a role in the end of the old Courts of Arcadia I would have kept my mouth shut, but they were just being opportunistic vultures.

"We can't afford to push the Golden Bloom too far," I reluctantly said. "They could make keeping what we still hold in Hainaut a nightmare with little effort and if they send out the Emerald Swords we'd have to pull our best fighting Named from the fronts to be able to handle them."

"I figure the prick out in the Bloom thinks the same, Cat," Indrani said. "Remember, the Dead King made their king's son into a Revenant that you put down at Third Liesse. There's no love there, and the elves have to know that if the screw with the Alliance too much they're helping along 'Ol Bones."

"They're elves, Indrani," I said. "Their take on foreign policy is shooting even the *birds* that come within a mile of their forest. I'm not saying they're idiots, but I'm honestly not convinced the Forever King wouldn't be in favour of a few million uppity humans being eaten before the Hidden Horror is driven back."

"They haven't brought their lands back into Creation, so maybe you're right," Archer said. "Mind you, there's at least one upside to that."

My brow rose questioningly. I couldn't really see one, to be honest. The Grand Alliance had neither the leverage nor the strength to spare to do anything about this, while just letting it happen seemed like a mistake.

"Might be Duchess Kegan won't be so eager for Daoine to go independent, when she hears about this," Indrani said. "Elves were bad enough on their own, but elves with a godhead? I don't

care how large the Watch gets, it'll be like fielding as shield wall of goblins against a pack of ogres."

I mulled on that a moment, even as I chewed on the bread. The Deoraithe were masters of defensive and irregular warfare, but as a rule they tended to be weaker on the offence. Restraint and their isolationist streak had still earned them an impressive military reputation, but the era where a duchy's army could stand up to those of the greater powers of Calernia was coming to an end. The Conquest had proved that massed mages and siege engines combined with heavy infantry could crush armies in the mould of the Old Kingdom's, and the rest of Calernia hadn't lain asleep in the decades that followed. Procer had fielded large units of priests and mages with its field armies during the Tenth Crusade, a significant departure from their old way of making war, and the years of fighting against Keter were further refining their methods.

Even the Dominion was starting to change its doctrine, using its limited numbers of Lanterns and Binders to crack open enemy lines much in the same way that the Legions of Terror used scorpions and goblin munitions.

That was the death knell of Daoine's military relevance, whether Duchess Kegan realized it or not. Putting together the Army of Callow had taught me how damned expensive an army of that kind was to raise and keep in fighting fit, and it simply wasn't a financial burden that the Duchy of Daoine's revenues was capable of supporting. The Watch were devils on the field, and arguably some of the finest foot on Calernia, but you couldn't win a war with them. House Iarsmai's historical military prudence was, at least in part, flowing from that realization. The issue was that, when everybody's military doctrine was done with its growing pains in twenty years, the Watch wouldn't even allow Daoine to win *battles*. Throw in that the enemy whose destruction was at the heart of their culture might raise its ruler to a form of lesser godhood, and Indrani could very well be correct.

The Grand Duchy of Daoine might just find the world outside a lot colder than expected, after leaving the Kingdom of Callow's protective embrace.

"If we can keep Daoine in the fold I won't complain," I said. "Though that should be Vivienne's situation to handle, in the end."

If we weren't all dead, by then I was likely to have abdicated. Besides, if Vivienne could begin her reign with the diplomatic feather in her cap of having kept the Deoraithe part of the kingdom she'd have an easier run of things going forward. I'd taught the last remains of Callowan nobility the dangers of trying to go against a popular queen backed by a powerful royal army.

"She seems to have a handle on things so far," Indrani shrugged. "And if we win against the Hidden Horror, it'll be a long time before the shine of that wears off. Hells, we might actually get a few decades of peace."

I was not nearly so optimistic. Too many parts of Calernia had only heard of the Dead King without ever catching sight of his armies or his monsters. The League of Free Cities hadn't even bothered to stop warring against itself as thousands of soldiers from an large coalition died to hold the defences to the north, and Praes was knee-deep in a civil war being prosecuted at what I could only call a *languid* pace. The rulers who'd seen the worst of the war would come out of it reluctant to war against those who'd been their comrades in the face of annihilation, but that'd only go so far. One of my hopes was that the construction of Cardinal would sap interest in resuming old skirmishes, given the many opportunities it represented, and that the city-state's territory would serve to settle at least some of the people whose lives had been upended by the wars.

"We'll see," I replied. "Even the peace years ought to be quite a ride, after a war like this one."

The afternoon passed slowly, after that, as the two of us sat and talked. Several messengers came to find me over the following bell, as I'd made it clear that the infirmary would be where I stayed, but there was nothing truly urgent to see to. Some concerns about the current tonnage of water that my rank obligated the stewards to inform me about, then a bold request for funding by a Proceran mage that I sent to Roland after skimming and finding the idea worth investigation. The closest thing to a crisis came an hour before Evening Bell, when I was informed that someone had been caught trying to enter one of the restricted zones of the Arsenal. It turned out to be a young couple trying to sneak off for a tryst, and I was informed they were very apologetic when they learned they'd triggered an alarm ward in their attempt to find a dark corner.

Their pays were docked, and in a fit of mercy I spared the two men the necessity of having to explain themselves to me in person. I sent written note warning that a repetition of the mistake would see them suspected of espionage, which should have them thinking twice about where they sneaking off.

"You're enjoying this," Indrani accused, afterwards.

My lips twitched treacherous.

"It's been a long time since I was asked to weigh in on things so..." I trailed off.

"Easy?" she suggested.

"Straightforward," I corrected. "The lower stakes are a relief."

The knowledge that the worse I courted if I made a mistake was passing embarrassment instead of the usual lives lost by the hundred. I enjoyed the calm all the more for the knowledge it was soon to come to an end. While the Arsenal might be its own little hermit kingdom, isolated from much that went on beyond its walls, the broader world was coming towards it. Tomorrow would bring the First Prince and the White Knight, and with them a great many troubles that for now still seemed on the horizon. The Painted Knife was nearing, too, and the envoys of the Titanomachy. Any of those visits would have been an event, but all of them in swift succession promised to be more of a circus. While I lost myself in thought, Indrani groaned and rose to her feet.

"Headed somewhere?" I asked.

"Having supper with Masego," she said. "You're welcome to come along but I'll be carving and he'll be reading."

"When you put it like that, how could I resist," I said, rolling my eyes. "Go on, have fun."

It left a strange taste in my mouth to say that. It wasn't jealousy, it'd essentially be the same as getting jealous. Vivienne was having dinner with Hakram, but it was... odd. The ease she'd said that with, the way she'd not needed to check he'd be there or even just inclined to have dinner with her – all those things spoke of a habit. It wasn't the first time they were doing it, and they'd been doing it for long enough they considered it a given it'd happen. It was oddly domestic, given who they were. I waved out Indrani, and idly wondered if perhaps I was a little jealous after all. Not of either of them, but perhaps of what they had. It'd been a long time since I'd had that level of intimacy with someone.

Not since Kilian.

I wasn't sure if I wanted that, and I knew I simply didn't have the *time* to afford something like it these days. Yet the easy way that Indrani had displayed a sort of intimacy I'd have not believed her capable of when we first met had me uneasy. My friends were changing and making lives for themselves while I swung my sword at the world trying to make it a little more like I wanted. My eyes moved to Hakram's, his chest rising and falling in steady rhythm as the spell took care of keeping his lungs going. Sometimes the changes weren't for the best. A knock on the door – too respectful to be Archer's – caught my attention and I invited in the messenger. A report from the captain of the garrison, I noted with a raised brow, and one that bore his official seal.

I cracked it open and as I scanned the lines I had to forcefully keep my fingers from clenching. The Mirror Knight had tried to enter the Red Axe's cell, insisting even when the guards refused to let him in. It'd come close to violence before he walked away. I folded the parchment, ignoring the messenger's nervous gaze. Someone had informed Christophe de Pavanie that I'd gone to speak with the Red Axe with Prince Frederic, I decided. This was not a coincidence. It also meant the Mirror Knight had friends within these walls that were willing to stretch the bounds of propriety to help him. I put away the parchment and dismissed the messenger without sending an answer to the report. I'd been warned of the incident, and since it'd not come to violence for now there was little I could do.

Not, that wasn't true. There were more than a few things I *could* do, but there was nothing I *should* do. At this point, overreaching would be dangerous. Restraint now could be used later to make the point to the White Knight that I'd tried patience only to find it ever more stringently tested.

Restless at the inaction, I rose to my feet and after patting Hakram's shoulder took to the halls. I had no precise destination in mind, though that parchment was burning a hole in pocket. I'd not been the only one to go to speak with the Red Axe, I considered. Maybe I should mention this to the Prince of Brus as well. I'd already been headed vaguely in the direction of the Alcazar, anyway. Halfway there I forced myself to admit that I wasn't going there to tell him about that report, or at least not *only* that. It'd do me no good to pretend otherwise. There were risks, although it wouldn't be difficult to weave an illusion around myself that'd ensure I wasn't seen going there. And if I was going to do this, which the way my teeth were worrying at my lip were telling me I was, then *now* would be the time. Before Hasenbach got here and the Arsenal was swarmed with guards and watching eyes.

I felt myself reach for the Night, beginning to weave an illusion, and admitted to myself I'd already made my choice.

I made sure to be seen returning to my rooms before backtracking under veil of Night, remembering the way to the Prince of Brus' quarters well enough from the last time I'd visited. If I'd been a few years younger I might have hesitated before knocking on the door, but in that sense Indrani had been good for me. A few moments passed and I felt a little like a fool. He might not be there at all, given that it was not so late. Perhaps it might be better if I left. Then the door was cracked open and Frederic Goethal curiously looked out, blue eyes slightly widening in surprise as he saw me. His blond locks were slightly dishevelled, and above the belt he wore only a loosely buttoned white cotton shirt that did nothing to hide the kind of muscles that came only from a warrior's life.

"May I come in?" I asked, doing nothing at all to hide the way I was looking at him.

Frederic of Brus's eyes darkened with something that I was rather looking forward to seeing unleashed.

"Please do," he replied.

The door closed hurriedly behind me and I came closer, noting he was just tall enough I had to lean up to kiss him. His hand found my hip, but it was my lips that found his in a soft, tentative kiss as I tiptoed upwards. A brief thing, and I withdrew to find his eyes still closed.

"You'll do," I decided, pushing him back against the wall.

There was nothing tentative at all about what followed.

—

I woke up not long past Midnight Bell, pleasurably spent and sweaty. Frederic, still deliciously naked under the twisted-up sheets, was still asleep at my side. It'd be a mistake to spend the night, given the risk of being seen, so reluctantly I wriggled out of his embrace and sat up on the bed. It was enough to wake him and he stretched out in a way that pleasantly captured my interest for a few moments. Getting my hands on his body had done nothing to damper my appreciation for it. Much the opposite, as it happened.

"Restless or leaving?" he asked, voice still husky from sleep.

"Leaving," I said. "As soon as I can find my clothes, anyway."

Where they'd ended up had not been a priority around the time I was taking them off.

"How soon you dispose of me," Frederic teased. "Did I disappoint?"

"I was vocal enough with my opinion you shouldn't need to fish for compliments," I drily said.

"One enjoys hearing those anyway," he grinned.

It'd been a while since I'd been with a man, but I'd definitely enjoyed returning to that brand of diversion. Thinking of it was enough to stir my interest again.

"Considering you're Alamans, I expect I won't have to mention that this is best kept under wraps," I said.

He looked rather amused.

"This is hardly my first tryst, though it has certainly been a... vividly memorable one," Frederic said, sitting up in the bed as well. "I understand that some passions are meant to remain discreet. I'll not moon after you like a green boy either, if that is your worry."

"I'd tolerate a bit of mooning," I grinned. "It'd be rather flattering. But only a bit."

"I'll see what I can arrange," he quietly laughed.

It really was shame it'd be genuinely terrible politics for even the suspicion of an affair between us to fall on either, I mused. I'd have thoroughly enjoyed more than one visit to this bed. Safer to cut this after one night, though, I knew. I'd taken risks enough already. On the other hand, I mused as I tossed aside the sheets and pushed him back against the headboard and got on top of him, the night wasn't quite over yet.

"One more for the road," I suggested.

The gasp that followed was not one of disagreement.

—

The following day, the First Prince and her escort arrived several hours before the White Knight and still Hanno set foot in the Arsenal before Cordelia Hasenbach.

With the wards back in order scrying relays to Creation had been established again, so the Procerans had known in advance that we'd had not only a fae incursion but several demons running loose not so long ago. Considering that the First Prince would be a great deal easier to kill than Hanno and the that magnitude of the political crisis that'd followed would be... significant, I'd not been offended when her personal guards had not taken me to my word when I'd told them the Arsenal was secure. A company of mages and soldiers had swept through the attainted areas with a fine comb, though I doubted that any mundane mage out of the Principate would able to catch something that the likes of Masego or Roland hadn't.

While I debated heading to the Arcadian waystation where the First Prince was awaiting the word to go on ahead from her people, I ultimately decided against it. Hasenbach liked her ceremony, and I might as well ensure I had her in as pleasant a mood as I could before the negotiations started. There was precious little of what I wanted to discuss with her that could be spoken about in such a public place, anyway. To my disappointment I learned that Vivienne would only be arriving tomorrow, having been slowed on the march by sudden rains that'd flooded the roads, but I'd lived without seeing her for several

months already. A day more or less wouldn't make much of a difference.

Besides, I kept busy: while security was an issue for Hasenbach the White Knight breezed right past her after a few greetings and proceeded straight into the Arsenal. I dragged Archer with me to watch my back, leaving as a lookout as I limped my way down a long set of stairs. The White Knight came out of the translocation ritual in the same wide room where the Mirror Knight had nearly drawn on me less than a week ago, a single mage in Arsenal livery at his side. Hanno looked tired, eyes pulled tight, and was leading his horse by the reins. He'd ridden hard, I decided, after hearing about the attack. Even odds he'd even ridden through the night on the last stretch, for him to be visibly tired: it wasn't something that came easy, in Named of his calibre.

"Black Queen," he greeted me.

"White Knight," I replied. "I'm pleased you came quickly."

"I can only wish I'd been there when the attack happened," Hanno frankly said. "None of the affairs that kept me from travelling with you were even near important enough, seen in retrospective."

"Hindsight's no cure for bad luck," I shrugged.

A sharp whistle sounded from the heights above, a sign from Archer we were about to have company. Indrani wouldn't have bothered for guards or diplomats, which meant Named.

"I'd wager that's my latest headache trudging towards us," I said. "I tried my hand at handling it and failed, White Knight, so it'll be yours to deal with."

Hanno's brow rose.

"I thank you for your assistance," he said, turning to offer the mage a smile.

She blushed, much to my amusement, and replied by espousing the virtues of duty before scurrying away. However nicely phrased, it'd very much been a dismissal. I eyed him speculatively. Heroes tended to be popular with women – and men, when so inclined – but I'd never know him to keep company. I didn't believe him to be like Masego, disinclined towards the act, but neither did I believe him so discreet he would have been able to keep a bedmate quiet.

"I received some interesting missives from the First Prince, when I passed by a scrying relay yesterday," Hanno said. "Including a subtle but rather firm request that I take Christophe of Pavanie

'in hand'. I've rarely known you to be in such swift accord with Cordelia Hasenbach, Catherine."

Well now, wasn't *that* interesting? Frederic hadn't been exaggerating when he'd said that the First Prince saw the Mirror Knight as a potential threat because of his closeness – and occasional nakedness – with the House of Langevin. If she was willing to start putting pressure on the White Knight to intervene before he'd even gotten to the Arsenal, then she was serious about curbing dear Christophe. While I'd only extend so much trust to Cordelia over much of anything, I was rather pleased at the notion that for once she might be entirely on my side – if largely for her own reasons.

"He still has the sword, and now he's making demands," I grunted.

"I've never known him to be prone to overstepping, only clumsy in expressing himself," the White Knight calmly said. "As for the Severance, while it should be temporarily returned to the Arsenal I can see no better wielder for it."

I could think of several, including the very man speaking to me. Those two had shared a front in Cleves, I recalled, before the Salian Peace and Callow joining the Grand Alliance. There might be a degree of trust there, the sort earned in battle. It didn't worry me overmuch, in truth, considering that Hanno was remarkably clear-eyed when it came to most things. Still, a warning was in order.

"Be careful with him," I said. "I don't think you'll find him all that pliable."

"Pliable is something a lord wants in a vassal," Hanno said. "I am not one, nor he the other. All I need of him is reason and a willing ear, neither of which he's ever failed to offer."

Our little chat was interrupted by armoured boots on stone as the Mirror Knight, in full armour and with the Severance at his hip, briskly began to make his way down the stairs. Looking rather uncomfortable and noticeably unarmed, the Blade of Mercy followed behind him. Christophe de Pavanie's green gaze was distinctly unfriendly as he took in my presence, though it stopped short of a glare and he began to pointedly ignore my presence. The boy at his side looked away from me when I glanced.

"White Knight," the Mirror Knight began the moment his boots reached the bottom of the stairs. "Your presence gladdens me."

A long moment of silence followed when Hanno did not reply. The White Knight eventually cocked his head to the side.

"I had assumed," Hanno slowly said, "that you were not done in your greetings. Was I incorrect?"

Huh. I threw him an appreciative glance for that even as Christophe's cheeks reddened.

"Wouldn't be the first lack of manners from him," I idly said. "I doubt it'll be the last. We'll speak later, White Knight."

"Until later then, Queen Catherine," Hanno replied with a slight bow.

I began to limp away, without further ado, and though the Mirror Knight began to say something that might have been a belated greeting I did not turn to hear it or bother to lend an ear. I was almost hoping he tried to pull something of the sort in front of Proceran diplomats, who'd be genuinely appalled at the sight. They were known to be polite to even people they despised, after all. Archer was awaiting at the top of the stairs, leaning against a wall. She'd kept the room below in sight the whole time, taking her duty of watching my back just as seriously in this place as she had in the tunnels of the Everdark. Different dangers here, perhaps, but barely fewer.

"So?" I asked as she pushed off.

"They were hurrying," Indrani said. "So they weren't just coming to greet Shiny Boots, I'd bet."

That soured the pleasant mood the night's exertions had left me in, even after this little interlude. They'd hurried because they'd heard I myself was there to receive Hanno, then. For them to have been forewarned, it meant they had more friends in the Arsenal than I'd hoped they would have. Not necessarily Named, as the Mirror Knight's slaying of no less than seven demons had earned him a great deal of admiration with soldiers and mages from the rank and file, but I wouldn't dismiss the notion outright either.

"With Hasenbach joining us tonight the number of soldiers in here will swell," I said. "We'll be able to spare some for more private duties. Reach out to Lieutenant Inger, Archer. I require some eyes."

With the First Prince's arrival, I finally had a pretext to meddle with the garrison without raising an eyebrow – given that Hasenbach would have a soldier escort of her own, it'd raise no eyebrows if I arranged one for myself out of garrison troops. I didn't intend to use mine guarding doors, though. I wanted to know who the Mirror Knight would speak with, and when. It would be imprudent to begin acting on anything before making sure how much support he had, exactly.

"I'll take care of it," Indrani said, pushing off the wall. "While you were down there a messenger came by for you, though. I took the message for you."

She fished out of her coat a small folded parchment, handing it over.

"And what's inside?" I asked.

Neither of us bothered to pretend she wouldn't have opened that without the slightest hint of hesitation.

"The First Prince of Procer is inviting you to dinner," Indrani said, wagging her eyebrows lasciviously.

Considering I could no longer claim to have never slept with Proceran royalty, answering that insinuation with even mock indignation would have, uh, weaker foundation than I might be used to.

"Well," I said, "I suppose I'm about due to have an exquisite meal spoiled by politics."

Chapter 32: Convened

"Let priests offer forgiveness before the hanging, a queen can only afford it after."

– Queen Yolanda of Callow, the Wicked (known as 'the Stern' in contemporary histories)

I found out, to my mild surprise, that there were not one but three private dining rooms in the Alcazar. I'd not even been aware that were any, though it made sense upon refection: it was the part of the Arsenal meant to host important guests, essentially the facility's diplomatic quarters. In my experience a great deal of diplomacy was had over meals and drinks, compared to the great formal conferences I'd envisioned as a girl. One of the two smaller rooms was where the First Prince of Procer received me, having brought her own private cooks to prepare the meal in the Arsenal kitchens. I appreciate the restraint of not having gone for the formal banquet hall, which was large enough that any meal taken there would bring with it a tiring amount of pageantry.

Instead we sat in an elegant and comfortable dining room whose walls were covered by panels of painted wood that I vaguely remembered being donated by the recently ascended Princess of Cantal. Lovely work with a touch of warmth to it. It was a pleasant departure from the bare stone that was so prevalent everywhere in the Arsenal. The meal itself was of the quality I'd come to expect from Cordelia Hasenbach's personal cooks, which was to say both delicious and almost unnecessarily elaborate. Four services, each with a paired cup of wine – I noticed she drank on sparsely from hers – and ranging from some sort of potage whose ingredients came from a garden first planted by the founder of the Principate to a roasted bird that ate only

enchanted seeds and was illegal for anyone but royalty to eat in most of Procer.

Unlike me, it seemed that Hasenbach had something of a sweet tooth. Though she'd eaten with measured grace throughout the meal, she dug into the fourth and final serving of a strawberry-topped custard tart sprinkled with slivers of marzipan with discreet enthusiasm. I ate enough of mine to be polite but found myself much more interested in the bottle of wine that'd been provided to me: Vale summer wine. Slightly cooled in a chillbox, as was the custom this side of the Whitecaps, it proved a pleasurable way to end the finest meal I'd had in a long time.

"I suppose it would be unpatriotic of me to admit I'm growing fond of Proceran cuisine," I mused.

"I will refrain from spreading it around," the First Prince drily replied.

I'd actually put on a dress for once, given that any fighting taking place tonight was unlikely to involve swords. One of the downsides to being known as a soldier queen was that there was an expectation I'd show up to everything looking like I was fit for battle, something that was rarely compatible with the sort of cotton summer dress I remained fond of wearing. Not that I could put on one of those when meeting with the likes of Cordelia Hasenbach, sadly. The Arsenal was too cold anyway. Instead I'd put on a long-sleeved dress in black velvet, discreetly embroidered with my heraldry in silver thread on the sides. I'd not bothered with jewelry aside from a set of intricate silver bracelets set with grey agates I'd received as a diplomatic gift from Hasenbach herself a year or two back.

My own small preparations were, naturally, nothing compared to the spectacle that was the First Prince of Procer receiving foreign royalty. The intricate brocade dress in gold and pale she must have been helped into – it was too tightly fitted to her frame for it to be anything but laced in the back – ended in long skirts that matched the length of the light ermine-collared cloak in the same colours she wore over the dress. A long, slender golden necklace set with sapphires reached well below her throat and over the cloak, calling attention to the narrowness of her waist by contrast. A clever trick of perspective, that, helped along by the way the skirts expanded swiftly outwards. It made her look like slender girl instead of the woman with the Lycaonese warrior frame she actually was. The cape hid the broad shoulders too, I'd noticed, which was a recurring pattern with her.

Still, with all the intricate layers and the way for once her long golden locks had been allowed to tumble down her back – in a very careful and artistic pretence of – carelessly I felt like you might be able to fit two of me in her.

"Much appreciated," I drawled. "So, if it's not too indiscreet to ask, how was it that you learned my favourite wine? I cannot help but feel deeply amused the prospect the famous Circle of Thorns going digging for that."

"It was learned by happenstance during the Liesse Rebellion," the First Prince idly replied, polishing off the last of her dessert. "A certain Hasan Qara used smugglers with which the Circle has ties to obtain a large enough quantity of the vintage that questions were raised."

I breathed out slowly, startled by the way the grief had jumped out at me. It'd been some time since I'd last thought of Ratface. Who'd trusted me and followed me, only to die by an assassin's blade on the night that Malicia had ensured that this could only end with one of us dead.

"I seem to have given offence," Cordelia softly said. "My apologies."

I mastered myself and waved it away.

"He was a good friend," I said. "He died during the Night of Knives and I miss him still."

The First Prince slowly nodded.

"If not for Agnes' foresight and the protection it affords, I would have lost much of my family to the Tower's assassins over the years," the fair-haired Lycaonese said. "I can only offer my sympathies for your loss."

I wasn't sure if she was simply that polished a speaker or if she genuinely meant it, but it made no difference. Ratface's corpse had been given a Legion funeral, in Laure, and one day I would settle his last accounts on his behalf. I could offer no more than that, though it would still be too small a thing for all that he'd freely given.

"We'll lose more before this is over," I simply said. "Tears are best kept for when the swords return to the sheath."

"A sentiment my people are more than passingly fond of," Cordelia said, faintly rueful.

Our conversation paused as an attendant came to take her empty plate, another bringing in an elegant porcelain teapot to replace it. The First Prince gestured for the woman to pour and she filled a cup with a dark tea fragrant enough I caught the scent from my seat – it was distinctly bitter, as Hasenbach seemed to prefer her brews. The attendants withdrew again after one filled my half-empty glass anew, leaving behind the bottle. Within moments we were alone in the room, and the tension began to rise.

After the meal and the idle talk that'd accompanied it, we would finally be getting at the meat of why she'd wanted this meeting.

"We have a great deal to discuss, Queen Catherine," the First Prince said. "This was true before I left Salia, and circumstance has since added to the heap of troubles ahead of us."

"The Prince of Brus conveyed your opinions and offer to me," I carefully said. "Yet I would take council with Lady Dartwick before speaking more to the subject."

Hasenbach lightly sipped at her tea, never making a sound.

"Jurisdiction over the Red Axe is one matter," she said. "The Mirror Knight and his involvement with the House of Langevin are another. Yet even further abroad we are not without ill news."

I frowned.

"Mercantis?" I asked.

Vivienne had recently warned me the situation there was bad and about to get worse, mentioning that we'd speak more of it in person, but I'd not believed it to have gotten to the point of 'ill news'. The Secretariat had warned me even earlier of going on there as well, through Secretary Nestor, but they'd been vague and I was not in the habit of flinching from shadows. I'd been skeptical then and remained skeptical now. The City of Bought and Sold might have gained some leverage over the Grand Alliance by its merchant lords and banks becoming the foremost lenders to the war effort, but they had to be aware that there were *limits* to how much they could push that. Given that most of the mercenary armies they relied on for protection were either six feet deep or under contract, these days, they were also rather vulnerable to directly expressed displeasure.

Also known as violence.

"There is a limit to the papers I can provide you on the matter," Cordelia said, surprisingly forthright, "as they contain privileged information on the Principate's capacities of production and trade. I will have what I can sent to your quarters, however, and I would myself convey the conclusions of my staff if you have no objection."

I hid my surprise. This was a lot more serious than I'd expected.

"Please do," I replied.

"To summarize, unprecedented burdens and the interruption of near all our usual trade routes have effectively ended Procer's ability to sustain itself without outside help," Cordelia Hasenbach said. "Conscription and the previous drains on our

treasuries are shaping what would have been a dire crisis into a risk of outright collapse."

Coming from the woman ruling what was still the most powerful nation on the surface of Calernia, that was *stark* thing to hear.

"You should still be able to trade with Callow and Levant," I pointed out.

It wasn't that I doubted her, but rather more that I was surprised. I'd been reading the treasury reports for the Grand Alliance assiduously, and though there'd been dips they'd never been long-lasting. I'd believed we were staying afloat, if not necessarily by much.

"The profits to be found there are smaller than those our merchants are accustomed to," the First Prince delicately replied.

Meaning the Kingdom of Callow and the Dominion of Levant, the two allies who'd not closed their doors to Proceran traders, were simply too *poor* for their trade to sustain Procer. That, I grimly thought, actually sounded about right. I'd been shocked at the wealth of even minor cities in the heartlands of the Principate for a reason.

"And within your own borders the trade is failing," I said, cocking an eyebrow.

"Prices have gone up for nearly all goods," Cordelia said. "To protect their own tradesmen and prevent other principalities from buying up their reserves, princes have been raising increasingly stiff tariffs."

Which was reasonable enough, I thought, but with an eye on the Principate as a whole it must be crippling. Maybe Procer at its peak could withstand every principality becoming as an island and cutting off trading ties, but it wasn't at its peak right now. Whole swaths of it had been ravaged by Black during his ill-fated march, the north had been turned into a series of ravaged war fronts and there was a mass of displaced refugees to care for in the heartlands. All those were drains that Procer simply wouldn't be able to sustain if all its principalities were closed-off and trying for subsistence instead of prosperity.

"Prince Frederic mentioned confiscations, when we discussed the state of affairs in Procer in passing," I slowly said. "How bad is it really?"

"They have become common practice even south of Lange, now," the blue-eyed princess replied. "If princes attempted to keep to their war quotas without resorting to them, nearly two thirds of the Principate would begin toppling into bankruptcy."

Oh *fuck*. That was... Hells, we were scraping through at rough cost and with only a little hope in the distance right now, but that was with the full weight of the Principate of Procer behind us. If it collapsed behind us the Dead King wouldn't even need to crack our defence lines: we simply wouldn't be able to field and feed large enough armies to keep him back. At that point we'd be forced to retreat, otherwise we were just feeding him well-armed corpses to march south with.

"But the Mercantis loans are keeping you afloat," I said.

"It is not sustainable in the long term," the First Prince said. "We will need increasingly larger loans to remain standing where we are the longer this continues. Yet you are correct, at the moment the coin from Mercantis had allowed us to ward off the spiral downwards."

I drank deep of my cup, barely even enjoying the taste of my favourite wine.

"Are *they* aware of that?" I asked.

Meaning, was awareness of the not negligible leverage this represented the reason they were pushing us now?

"I am uncertain," Cordelia said. "Given the unfortunate amount of success the Eyes of the Empire have had in infiltrating the Principate, however, I believe that on the other hand Dread Empress Malicia *is*."

Of course she godsdamned was. This wasn't the kind of knowledge she was just going to sit on either. Considering that she couldn't really spare military forces to stir up trouble at the moment, the possibility of going for the Grand Alliance's moneybags using her preferred weapons of knives and influence was the kind of opportunity she'd dig into with relish.

"For a woman fighting a civil war she's remaining unpleasantly active abroad," I growled.

The First Prince sipped at her tea.

"Lady Dartwick informed me that our... friend out east warned the Tower will soon take action in Mercantis," Cordelia said.

Yeah, she'd told me that as well. Our friend out east, huh. My lips twitched. A pretty little euphemism, that, used to refer to Dread Empress Sepulchral. I'd known her as High Lady Abreha Mirembe of Aksum back in the day, though our acquaintance had only been middling – I'd strong-armed her into backing the creating of the Ruling Council of Callow using her nephew as leverage, but we'd not really crossed paths since. She'd risen to prominence in the years that followed mostly by virtue of ruling

one of the few High Seats whose holdings had not been touched by civil war or foreign incursions. She'd failed to ride the wave of discontent against Malicia that'd welled up after the destruction of Thalassina all the way to the Tower, but against all expectations her eventual rebellion had not been brutally snuffed out by loyalist legions.

The two empresses past the Wasaliti were still grappling even now, and though Malicia's position was the stronger Sepulchral's own was in no immediate danger of collapse.

"I'd count that as good information," I said. "Malicia scoring victories against foes abroad will strengthen her position with the nobles, so it's in Sepulchral's interests to see her thwarted."

"You had some involvement with Sepulchral when she was still High Lady of Aksum, as I understand it," the First Prince said. "Did you form an opinion of her?"

"Her nephew's the one I had the most dealings with, and he was a follower of the Diabolist with waning ties to his aunt," I cautioned. "But Abreha Mirembé..."

Black had considered her one of the most dangerous nobles in the Empire, considering the amount of blood she'd shed to claim Aksum, but it was not my father's opinion being sought.

"In a lot of ways, she's emblematic of Wasteland upper nobility as a whole," I eventually said. "Cunning, even brilliant in some regards, but also appallingly callous. Abreha Mirembé does not have ideals – or perhaps it might be more accurate to say that her ideal is the acquisition of power no matter the costs."

"The Circle judged her to be hard and opportunistic even by Praesi standards," Cordelia shared.

"Praesi in her rarefied circle of nobility are expected to exalt cruelty in the same way that your princes are expected to show off their piety," I frankly said. "That she not only survived but outright thrived in that environment should tell you a lot about her. She can be relied on to slide a knife into Malicia's back every chance she gets, but not much else."

We'd strayed from our original discussion Mercantis, though, so I subtly changed the subject back to it.

"Mercantis," I said. "I doubt you would have brought it up to me without having some sort of a solution in mind."

The First Prince drank from her cup, taking her time, and set it down so delicately I barely heard the clink of porcelain on porcelain.

"Diplomacy will not be enough to settle that matter," Cordelia Hasenbach said. "It is unfortunate, but no less true for it."

My brow rose. Well now, that was bold of her. And a far cry from her usual methods.

"I can't commit my troops still in Callow to an attack on the city," I warned. "Even if I could afford the vulnerability to Praes that'd bring, only a fool would try an assault on Mercantis without a proper fleet."

Which the Kingdom of Callow did not have. In theory it might be possible to requisition river barges and fishing boats up the Hwaerte until there were enough floating rafts to manage a crossing with, but considering that Mercantis had a small but professional fleet of dedicated warships trying that would just be pissing away an army at the bottom of the Great Lake.

"Nothing quite so significant is required," the fair-haired princess replied. "A few Chosen and Damned, however, would make the point felt quite clearly."

I grimaced. It'd be less of a headache trying to shake a few of those free than trying to shuffle around troops, admittedly, but it'd still be a headache. The real issue was that at least one of those Named would need to have a reputation as a genuine threat to something the size of a city-state if they were to serve as a potable warning against overreach. We had few Named of that calibre, and they were best used up north on the fronts. Pulling one off for what someone unaware of the nuances might think to just be petty politics would not be popular, aside from the actual martial considerations in pulling out such a war asset.

"I could reach out to the Kingdom Under," I suggested.

Mercantis was under their protection, and the dwarves had a vested interest in the Grand Alliance continuing to make a dent in the forces of the Dead King.

"If the King Under the Mountains can be convinced to intervene, it will have a significant impact," Cordelia agreed. "Yet the dwarves have traditionally been reluctant to involve themselves in such matters."

Which was probably why she'd not opened by requesting I try that – she didn't believe the Kingdom Under would actually move even if asked. She might not be wrong, since they were a pretty mercenary people and they didn't exactly owe me any favours at the moment. Those had been spent keeping the drow fed on their exodus, amongst other things. Might as well find out, though, there wasn't much to lose in asking.

"I'll draft a letter," I said, drumming my fingers against the table.

"Thank you," she smiled. "While I would ask you to consider the practicalities of sending Chosen to Mercantis, such a measure would yet be distant. I have arranged a conference with representatives of the Consortium here in the Arsenal. I would be pleased if you could attend it."

Impressing the merchants with a look at the Arsenal, huh? A pretty simple tactic, but it'd probably still be somewhat effective considering how unearthly and impressive this place could look. It wasn't like this place wasn't going to turn into a major diplomatic artery for a month or two anyway, we might as well make use of it properly.

"I'll be there," I agreed. "Have the details sent to my people."

I let a moment pass.

"To be sure," I slowly said, "you do want me in that room to scare them, correct?"

The First Prince of Procer was too self-controlled to be visibly embarrassed by my laying out the truth so bluntly, but I doubted it was a coincidence she chose that moment to take a sip of tea.

"Your reputation carries a great deal of weight, Queen Catherine," the blue-eyed princess carefully said. "Your displeasure would not be courted lightly."

Meaning that those representatives were a lot less likely to try to push the Grand Alliance if I made it clear that such a mistake would lead to my gating in with a few thousand drow one evening and expressing my *displeasure*. Fair enough. I'd have hesitated to be the rabid hound of this play more if there were likely to be long term diplomatic consequences for Callow, but my abdication should see to the worse of that. Besides, by then my home should be a lot less afraid of Mercantis' displeasure: if trade with Praes and Procer was open, then the Consortium's usefulness as a middleman waned significantly.

"I'm sure they can be made to understand that if their greed ends up feeding Calernia to Keter, before the end I'll personally lead my armies to raze Mercantis to the ground and salt the ashes," I mildly said.

"The very sort of talk that might give the ambitious pause," Cordelia delicately admitted. "The imprudence in relying too heavily on the Consortium has been made clear, however, which demands other measures be taken. Bringing peace to even part of the Free Cities would allow for the resumption of trade, and so lessen the burden on the southern principalities."

"In principle I'm very much in favour," I said. "I simply don't see a practical way to achieve peace in the region anytime soon."

The wars in the League of Free Cities had reached a point of stalemate, more or less. Basileus Leo Trakas still ruled in the city of Nicae itself, but he'd lost the countryside to Strategos Zenobia and neither could afford to dislodge the other. Penthes' armies had been whipped on the field by General Basilia, who'd managed to get Helike in order behind her, but after the casualties of the Proceran campaign and half her army leaving to serve under the Grand Alliance she didn't have the siege or mages to take Penthes itself – whose much-despised Exarch Prodocius was rumoured to be propped up by Malicia directly. Stygia was quietly feeding the flames, hoping to expand after everyone was spent, and neither Atalante nor Bellerophon seemed inclined to get involved.

Only Delos was keeping an eye on things, but while the Secretariat had passed information to me in the past it was also very reluctant to surrender its current neutrality. The askretis had no interest in a war after the way their last one had gone.

"Though there will be difficulties," Cordelia Hasenbach said, "if the signatories Grand Alliance were to wield their clout in accord it would not be impossible to effect change."

I watched her and drank from my cup, noncommittal. There'd been good reasons for the Grand Alliance being so reluctant to involve itself in the wars of the League, and though what I'd learned about the darkening of Procer changed the situation some I was still inclined to caution there. Any resources spent on trying to plug that sinking boat might very well end up wasted with nothing to show for it, leaving us even worse off than before.

"A shared recognition of Strategos Zenobia as the legitimate ruler of Nicae, for example, would strengthen her support," she suggested.

"Not enough to topple Leo Trakas," I pointed out.

Which would make the gesture entirely pointless, as far as I was concerned.

"Perhaps so, if paired with a severing of all ties with territory under the rule of the Basileus," Cordelia said.

That'd put pressure, though not an enormous amount: with sea trade in the Samite Gulf good as dead, Nicae wouldn't be taking any real losses by this. It'd still be made a pariah to a large coalition, though, and that might make some nobles in the city turn on the Basileus out of fear the sanctions would remain even when things calmed. It was also, however, something that might just backfire spectacularly if the people of Nicae were moved to

anger by the foreign interference into their affairs. Something that the First Prince would be well aware of, which meant there was another angle there.

"Under what pretext?" I asked.

"I would have the Grand Alliance name Leo Trakas a friend to the Dead King, and so an enemy to all the living," the First Prince said.

My hands clenched. I forced them to loosen, then drank again from the cup as I gathered my thoughts. The refusal on the tip of my tongue had been instant, but it had been more a thing of instinct than thought. This entire proposal smacked of the House of Light declaring me Arch-heretic of the East to me, only even more shamelessly political. Basileus Leo Trakas was inconvenient to us, and circumstances might well have forced him into some degree of alliance with the Tower, but it was going a step too far to call him an ally of the Dead King. I calmly set down my cup.

"I don't like the precedent this sets," I said. "We're an alliance, not the ruling lords of Calernia. And while this sort of denunciation might be taken as face value by a lot of people, given the war we're in, we both know that Leo Trakas is mostly trying to stay alive at the moment. I've little pity to spare for the man, but I'm not comfortable using titles like 'friend to the Dead King' as a diplomatic stick."

It was the sort of thing that made a man genuinely desperate, and a Basileus with both nothing left to lose and *helpful* Wasteland friends was a recipe for disaster.

"I understand your hesitation," the First Prince said. "It does not please me to have to resort to such a method. My advisors suggested the same manoeuvre be used to exert pressure on Penthes, in truth, but I balked. It would be an overreach."

So Exarch Prodocius, arguably by far the worse man of the two for having helped Malicia arrange a use of Still Water, would be spared the same epithet. Because Cordelia was trying to put together the western half of the League as a mostly stable trading bloc for the Principate, not the east. The naked truth laid bare by what she must have considered to be a demonstration of restraint only made me more uneasy. Some of that must have shown on my face, as she pressed forward.

"As you have yourself pointed out, we otherwise lack the means to truly affect matters in the Free Cities," the fair-haired princess said.

"I still think that even in putting out the fire in Nicae you'd be laying the foundations for a worse blaze down the line," I said. "Did you go to Levant about this?"

"The Holy Seljun was willing to agree," she replied. "Though only after a formal vote of signatory members, and only should that vote be unanimous."

Ah, so Wazim Isbili was cleverer than his reputation implied. That way Tariq's distant nephew could let me refuse Procer on his behalf instead of having to do his own dirty work. That trick of procedure, though, spoke to me of a smaller nation used to existing in Procer's shadow and wary of helping it gain too much influence even in a crisis. Those passed, after all, while influence gained during them lingered a lot longer. Of course, if I could figure this much out then Hasenbach could as well. I cocked a silent eyebrow at her.

"As I said," the First Prince of Procer repeated, "I understand your hesitation. Perhaps a more cautious approach would better suit? A private mock-vote can be had, and should it be unanimous a letter of warning can be sent to Leo Trakas as to what will follow."

I didn't like having even the pretence of my seal of approval on this, but unfortunately she was right that we weren't flush with ways to settle the mess in the League. It might not be avoidable for me to get my hands dirty here. *And I can always change my vote when it comes to actually going through with this.*

"You're leveraging him," I said, implicitly agreeing. "So what is it you're trying to leverage him into?"

"Opening the gates of Nicae to Strategos Zenobia, who by law is the senior ruler of the city-state," Cordelia said. "This would be under guarantee of safety for him and his partisans, naturally. I have been corresponding with Zenobia and she is amenable to those terms."

I couldn't help but notice she'd not mentioned General Basilia, who'd been the one to raise Zenobia up in the first place. Mostly as a way to keep Nicae off her back while she went after Penthes, but it couldn't be denied the two were aligned with Basilia the distinct greater of that alliance.

"I could get Helike to accept those terms," I said, "if Zenobia is willing to turn on Penthes."

The First Prince's eyes narrowed as she watched me closely.

"In what sense?" she asked. "The city will have little force to field after this."

"It will have ships," I said. "The lack of which is one of the reasons Basilia can't siege the coastal fortresses properly."

Able to cut them off from the sea, the Helikean general might be able to starve them out even if she couldn't take the walls. Or at least make a good enough threat of it that Prodocius' army would have to either give battle or face the prospect of losing every holdout outside the walls of Penthes. Considering that Basilia seemed a lot more interested in winning her wars than cementing influence over Nicae, I suspected she'd take naval support from Nicae over Leo Trakas' head on a pike. He'd made for a pretty middling rival, anyway.

"I will have to contact the Strategos," Cordelia said, "yet I suspect she will be amenable to such terms."

I suspected that Hasenbach would push for acceptance, regardless of whether or not Zenobia liked the deal. It was compounding gain with gain, from the Proceran perspective: with a fleet on her side, Basilia would be able to become a serious headache for another ally of the Tower. More importantly she'd be doing that fighting in the eastern territories of the League, far from anything Hasenbach currently cared about. Considering that while I might be the effective patron of Basilia's Helike the Principate had a much more contentious relationship with her, keeping the general busy in the east might even be considered yet another gain. I nodded sharply.

"Stygia's going to be an issue," I said. "Lukewarm as they might be on the Tower, they're not going to let alliances firm up the western League without taking measures."

"I concur," the Lycaonese princess said. "And it so happens I have a few thoughts on how to check them."

We must have spoken for at least an hour more after that, breaking only for a bit when we had to send for maps – I was trying to make the point of why a Nicaean support fleet would practically double the size of what Basilia could field in soldiers just because of the supply line they represented – and Hasenbach excusing herself to use the privy. It was turning out to be a thoroughly productive evening, and though the suggestion of sponsoring defensive pacts between cities against Stygia in particular would be dead in the water without Atalante or Delos being brought on, it was a solid notion we could keep pushing without a significant investment of resources on our part.

In time the subject was exhausted, at least in the sense that more could not be discussed without the both of us having sought answers outside and read through reports. I was just starting on my third cup of Vale summer wine by then, though I'd been slow in drinking it, so I was largely sober and feeling rather vivified by how much we'd gotten done. In a concession to my own consumption Hasenbach had sent for a cup of hydromel she'd been nursing ever since she'd finished the tea, and it was that she set down when the conversation hit a low ebb.

"I believe we have discussed the matter exhaustively enough for the night," the First Prince said.

"Agreed," I said.

I sighed, leaning back into my seat.

"So let's talk about the troubles closer to home."

Chapter 33: Convenience

"Thirty-seven: theft in the service of Above is not a sin. It is, however, still a crime. Be discreet."

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

"Shall we begin with the least contentious of the subjects to be broached?"

Her Most Serene Highness Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer, Warden of the West and Protector of the Realms of Man, struck me as looking rather cautious right now. Wary of angering me? Might be, depending on what she considered to be the least contentious of the things we needed to talk about. It was always relative, when it came to stuff like this – the least murderous of three High Lords still usually had an unfortunate amount of murder under their belt. I took a long sip from my cup, letting the pleasant taste of my favourite wine linger against my palate.

"I'm all ears," I said.

"There are, from the reports I have received about the incident at the Arsenal, two Damned who will need to face punishment," the First Prince said. "Namely, the Concocter and the Hunted Magician."

I smothered a grimace at the pun, which I would generously assume to have been unintentional.

"All other villains who were involved are dead," I agreed.

So that was why she'd been cautious, huh. Dealing with villains was my legal responsibility, in the end. The Hunted Magician would stand trial before a tribunal, since he'd actively helped along an invasion of the Arsenal and the Arsenal was an interest of all the signatory states of the Grand Alliance, but the tribunal itself couldn't actually sentence him to anything. Only I could, as his representative under the Terms. In theory, at least. In practice, if I outright ignored the recommendations given out by a tribunal that'd count the White Knight and representatives for both Procer and Levant, I'd be asking for a diplomatic shitstorm.

Hanno would be in the same situation when it came to the Red Axe. I'd have a seat on her tribunal as well, as both the representative for both Callow and Below's lot, but I wouldn't have the right to pass a sentence on her any more than the First Prince or whoever the Dominion ended up sending. There were good reasons for that. In my case, for example, if I had the authority to sentence heroes it'd lead to the rebellion of more than a few before the day was out. Hanno of Arwad was trusted as an adjudicator, and only him. Though while he had the same right to outright ignore anything the rest of the tribunal would say, when it came down to it he'd also have the same considerations as me to deal with.

Hasenbach was treading carefully here because, after pushing for the Red Axe to be tried by Procer and not under the Terms, she did not want me to mistake her asking about my current leanings on punishing my charges as an attempt on her part to keep usurping authority over the Terms.

"May I be blunt?" I asked.

Something like an amused flicker passed through those blue eyes.

"Have you not been?" the First Prince of Procer asked.

Well now, I thought, lips twitching. Get another few drinks into that one and she might actually be fun.

"I don't think you're trying to get your hands on the Terms," I frankly said. "Only an idiot would try to make that many Named into a personal army, and even back when negotiating with you regularly drove me to screaming I did not believe you to be one. You don't need to tread lightly for fear of offending me there. If I consider you to be overstepping I will say as much, but I am not looking to be offended."

Blue eyes considered me, weighing the extent of my honesty in speaking, then she nodded.

"A lengthy trial for the Hunted Magician would be damaging," Cordelia said. "And your intentions when it comes to the Concocter remain unclear. I would establish as soon as possible what you intend, so that the affair can be solved swiftly when it comes to deliberation."

"You won't be alone in that tribunal," I pointed out. "And, now that I think of it, will it be you personally or a representative?"

"I might have nominated Princess Rozala if we could afford to pull her from the front, but as circumstances stand I will personally represent the Principate," she said. "And while I will

freely profess to be unable to account for the White Knight, Lord Yannu Marave's interests are well known to me."

Ah, so Juniper's old foe from the Champion's Blood was the one the Dominion has sent. Considering the Cleves front was supposed to be holding steady at the moment I supposed he was the natural pick. My own two Levantines might represent a significant bloc in the Dominion now that they were betrothed, but they were both still a little young for this sort of game. The Lord of Alava had a weightier reputation than either and probably better understood how to preserve the interests of Levant.

"What *does* Levant want out of this?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"To ensure punishment is dealt," the First Prince said, "and to avoid, at all costs, even the shadow of a precedent that might force them to ennoble one of their Damned."

Yeah, that sounded about right. Aside from the Grey Pilgrim, whose concerns tended to extend far from the borders of the Dominion, in my experience the Blood tended to hardly care about what went on beyond their borders. So long as their anger wasn't actively courted, they were unlikely to take a stand.

"Neither should be an issue," I said. "When it comes to the Hunted Magician, considering his cooperation with the Wandering Bard it's a given that he loses the right to object to assignments for the remainder of the duration of the Terms."

"Yet, given the nature of his talents, he would still be best employed at the Arsenal," Cordelia skeptically noted.

Meaning it was an empty punishment, as far as she was concerned, since he wouldn't be going anywhere or be losing anything.

"That'd be the basic consequence of dealing with an enemy, not the punishment," I replied. "For that, I'm currently leaning towards a fine. Within the next three days we should have estimates of what the damages to the Arsenal will cost to repair. A fine of that amount will be given."

I paused.

"Once for each signatory nation of the Grand Alliance," I said. "In addition, he will personally have to repay the pensions any of our nations give to the families of soldiers who died during the attack."

The First Prince's brow rose, ever so slightly.

"That would be a considerable sum," she said.

More than any man could repay in a lifetime, though admittedly the occasional villain got more than that. With a debt like that

over his head the Magician was a lot more likely to leg it to the Free Cities after the war than stick around and repay it. I'd considered that, of course. The trick was in how it'd be paid back.

"It would be up to the nations to decide in what nature they might prefer that repayment," I said. "The Kingdom of Callow, however, will accept it in artefact-crafting and enchanting work."

Meaning Vivienne would have a fortune's worth of labour from one of the finest mages on the continent to call on when her reign began, already paid for. The Rhenian princess considered me for a moment, remaining silent as her well-honed mind parsed out all the implications.

"While heavily in debt, to a sum total comparable to a prince's treasury if not greater, the Magician will also have direct ties to the rulers of three great nations," Cordelia quietly said. "In the world of the Accords, that would be the sort of protection one of the Damned might well kill for."

It really was. So long as three crowns had a fortune's worth of highly valuable and difficult labour left to extract out of the Hunted Magicians' hide, none of them were likely to let the man get his head cut off by an overzealous hero or bar their door to him. I was still making the man a beggar for at least a decade, forcing him to largely live on the charity of the patrons he'd work for, so it wasn't like I was letting him off easy. But it was the sort of punishment that would win me points with the cleverer among my kind and avoid alienating the Magician entirely.

"The Concocter deserves less punishment," I said, "and I don't intend to convene a tribunal over it. She'll lose the right to refuse assignments, like the Magician, but aside from that I only intend to have her personally brew tailored potions for every lastingly wounded soldier in the Arsenal or the family of any deceased. The ingredients will, of course, come out of her pocket."

A princely gift, in the sense that few aside from princes would otherwise be able to afford the Concocter brewing for them personally. I owed the woman a favour for having kept Hakram alive, so I intended to offer to quietly float her a loan from my own funds to pay for the ingredients. If it just so happened that I forgot to ask for interest or a fixed timeline for repayment, well, so be it. Hakram was worth a lot more to me than the coin, and it would have still been a bargain for a hundred times the price.

"A harsh price, given the paucity of her involvement," Cordelia said, "but that will win you esteem from Lord Yannu. You foresee no complications there?"

"None," I said.

"I had expected that I would have to push for harsher sentences," the First Prince admitted. "In that I did you disservice, for you have struck an admirable balance between stern and sufferable."

I snorted.

"I have weaknesses as a queen, glaring ones," I said, "but I've been a warlord and leader of Named since I was seventeen. When it comes to that, you can expect a steady hand of me."

It wasn't the same, handing out a sentence as a queen and as the leader of a band. No ruler in the world had absolute authority, true enough, but it was an even more tenuous thing Named. Too loose a hand and they would run wild, too firm and they would leave. I'd believed my father to have been as a lord over the Calamities, when I'd been younger, and half-believed it a fault when I later grasped he was anything but. Being a representative under Terms had forced me to understand, though, how delicate a balancing act his leadership of that band had really been. I'd done this for many more Named than Black had ever led, but I'd also done it for scarcely two years and with literal Death knocking at the door up north. He, on the other hand, had kept the Calamities largely sane and safe for several decades even with few outside threats to keep them together.

"Talent is distributed blind to titles and breeding," Cordelia said.

I'd take that for the backhanded compliment that it was. I doubted Hasenbach and I would ever see eye to eye on a lot of things – it'd be hard to, when she would always put Procer first and I Callow – but that'd not prevented a degree of respect from emerging as our working relationship grew less venomous. I would not soon forget how many of my soldiers had died in a war I'd not wanted to fight, or the burning anger of having peace refused again and again, but I had less unpleasant things to add to the tally now. She'd turned out too damn useful over the last two years for the old anger to be the only thing I associated with her now.

"Flattery," I said. "Which tells me we've gotten to more contentious territory. Which poison will be your pick, Your Highness: the fool with the god-killing sword or the threefold nightmare of jurisdiction?"

The blonde Lycaonese sipped at her mead, the largest I'd yet seen her take. She'd be laughed out of a Callowan tavern as

lightweight, I suspected, but then she didn't strike me as the kind of woman to step into a tavern in the first place.

"I have concerns about the Mirror Knight, as Prince Frederic made known to you," Cordelia said. "I understand that you have some of your own."

Much as I would have enjoyed venting about Christophe de Pavanie, I wasn't having a drink with Indrani. Petulance would get me nowhere, so it'd be best to keep this concise.

"The extent of my concerns will depend on his actions over the coming few days," I said. "He has made demands wildly beyond his authority – a full pardon for the Red Axe – and that he's made demands at all is alarming, but so far that's only been words. So long as it doesn't go further than that, I'm willing to let a lot of it be water under the bridge."

The Mirror Knight had turned what would have been certain death for Hakram into something less immediately mortal, though if the Concocter hadn't been on her way Adjutant would have died regardless. I owed him significantly less than I did the Concocter, but I owed him still. So I'd swallow my anger and let bygones be bygones, so long as he behaved. Hasenbach's eyes went sharp.

"You do not believe he will necessarily defer to the White Knight," the First Prince stated.

It was not a question and neither of us pretended otherwise.

"I've difficulty putting my finger on how messy that might get," I admitted. "But if they disagree, the Mirror Knight will not simply capitulate."

"A coup, even a soft one, would be unacceptable to the Principate," Cordelia coolly said. "The Terms as signed do not have provisions for the White Knight to be replaced, save should he die."

"The legalities won't kill this," I said. "Not with heroes, Hasenbach. Villains you can cow or bribe, but that won't work with Above's lot. They'll hold to doing *the right thing* even when it's an anchor around their neck – or everybody else's, for that matter."

She did not reply for a long moment and I bit my tongue. It'd come out just a little too caustic to have sounded entirely objective, which I regretted already. Anger would win me no points with this one, even if she decided it was justified anger.

"Would you be opposed to my intervening in the matter as First Prince?" she asked. "While this cannot be termed as an entirely

Proceran issue, given those involved, it can not be denied that my subjects are at the heart of it."

"If you can disarm him with words I'll applaud," I said. "But this could turn on you right quick. If you're seen as interceding on my behalf that'll taint you by association, and in a way that might not be reparable."

It shouldn't be forgotten that the Mirror Knight would be her problem a lot longer than mine, assuming we all survived the war. He was a powerful Proceran hero with ties to a royal house, there'd be no disappearing into countryside obscurity for him.

"I will take your warning under consideration," the First Prince mildly said.

Meaning that I was trying to teach a knight how to ride, but very politely implied. Fair enough.

"The Severance remains the most salient issue concerning him," she continued.

My eyes narrowed.

"And what is Procer's stance on that?" I asked.

"Given that it was forged with materials that the Kingdom of Callow provided on Arsenal grounds and as part of an Arsenal undertaking, the artefact is to be considered a war asset of the Grand Alliance," the First Prince replied, the answer smooth and easy.

Practiced as well, no doubt. While Callow arguably had the best claim to the sword since I'd provided the initial material of it – though it shouldn't be forgot it was an aspect ripped out of a woman at least in theory a Proceran subject – my interest in securing it for the kingdom after the war was lukewarm at best. The First Prince's stance here was nuanced enough I wouldn't outright be renouncing the claim I hardly cared about, just weakening it, but it came with the upside of having the Severance designated as a war asset of the Grand Alliance. That meant we could strip it and assign it wherever we wanted, so long as the three signatory nations weren't stuck in an impasse.

"I'm amenable to those terms," I said.

She was just a tad too slow in suppressing her surprise. The eyes gave it away. Hadn't expected me to give my inch quite so swiftly, huh? If there'd been a Named back home that was a good fit for the sword I might have fought harder, but there simply wasn't one.

"Then we are in agreement," Cordelia faintly smiled. "I expect that Lord Yannu will be of a like mind, as it happens."

I snorted. Yeah, I'd heard that Mirror Knight wasn't all that popular with the Levantines. They were a touchy lot, especially when it came to their history with the Principate, and Christophe de Pavanie had been cursed with the twin disadvantages of being Proceran and prone to giving offence.

"The little I heard of the White Knight was in partial agreement to this," I noted. "Though he mentioned that he considers the Mirror Knight the best fit for the sword when it *is* assigned."

"It would be doing a disservice to the other Chosen to refrain from even considering their candidature," the blue-eyed princess diplomatically replied.

Meaning she *really* wasn't eager to leave it with good ol' Christophe. Music to my ears. I supposed from her perspective it'd be handing both a powerful weapon and a powerful symbol to hero already tied to a rival power within her borders, something that was bound to come back to bite her down the line. Mind you, the damned thing was a sword meant to be used so it couldn't *all* be about the politics.

"Come the time to assault Keter, if he's truly the best pick then I'll swallow my tongue and do what needs to be done," I admitted. "Until then I'd prefer him nowhere near that blade."

"Establishing the precedent that the Grand Alliance can strip and assign the sword is more important than the hands holding it at the moment," the First Prince said. "Though I will not deny that removing it as a symbol will be helpful considering he appears to be, as you have said, trying to arrange a pardon for the Red Axe."

And so we finally got to the thorniest of the knots.

"I imagine your stance on *that* won't have changed since it was conveyed to me," I said.

Meaning that she wanted the Red Axe tried under Proceran law for the attempted regicide of Frederic Goethal, regardless of any other claim there might be on the heroine's life.

"In essence it has not," Cordelia calmly said. "I am sure that, as a ruler yourself, you can understand the difficulty in being unable to hold a trial over the attempted assassination of one of my princes. An attempt that took place before more than half a hundred witnesses, no less."

"Her slaying of the Wicked Enchanter was done in front of more than twice that," I pointed out.

Which wasn't the issue, I knew even as I quibbled on the detail. Her issue was that the First Prince of Procer was finding herself unable to punish or even imprison someone who'd tried to kill a sitting member of the Highest Assembly, which must admittedly be infuriating.

"I do not deny that her breach of Terms also deserves punishment," she said. "Simply that her actions against the Principate take precedence."

"We can't try a corpse," I frankly said. "Which is what her actions would fetch, though I'm not sure what manner of execution follows attempted regicide in Brus."

"Boiled alive in oil," the First Prince replied without batting an eye.

Grisly, but hardly any worse than the drawing and quartering it would earn in Callow – and even that bloody practice was well shy of the ancient atrocity known as *red hangings* I preferred not to think too much about.

"Charming," I drily said. "Might hinder the process of questioning some, if you ask me, though on the upside at least it'll be a quick trial."

"If I were to concede that a trial could be held under the Terms before the sentence to the Principate's own was applied, would that remedy your objection?" the blonde princess asked.

That was already a better look for the whole affair, but it was also strictly that: a look. In substance, we'd still be establishing the jurisdiction of Proceran law over the Named serving under the Terms.

"What kind of a trial would you be holding, exactly?" I asked, frowning. "I'm familiar with Salienta's Graces, but I recall there's some sort of exception for matters of treason that explains why your people have two kinds of magistrates."

"Treason, heresy and royal dues fall under the authority of the crowns and not the rights of the people of Procer," Hasenbach clarified. "Given the unfeasibility of princes personally seeing to such judgements over their entire holdings, royal magistrates might be appointed to do so in their stead. In this particular case, however, Prince Frederic would be entitled by royal prerogative to render judgement himself."

Which would actually play out decently with villains, I thought. It'd be a heroic mess cleaned up by a heroic blade. I'd have to posture a bit and agitate in the Wicked Enchanter's name, but the Kingfisher Prince beheading the Red Axe would settle this halfway agreeably for everyone. Which made it all the more galling that

he wasn't going to be doing that. That lovely thing he did with his hips wasn't anywhere near enough to excuse the headaches he was causing me.

"Yet he won't," I grunted, not hiding my displeasure. "So where does it go from there?"

"A formal trial by the Highest Assembly," Cordelia said. "Which I will admit would have... uses in settling other troubles."

It took me a moment to put the pieces together, as I was not used to putting myself in the shoes of the First Prince. Ah, she could use this whole affair to turn the screws on Prince Gaspard Langevin. The man would be fraying his ties to the Mirror Knight if he voted to have the Red Axe killed, since the hero wanted her pardoned, but it'd still be better than the alternative. Should he vote for acquittal after all, or even a lesser punishment, he'd be fraying ties to *every single prince and princess of Procer*. No one, after all, was denying that the Red Axe had tried to kill Frederic. Considering how popular the Prince of Brus was in the north, actually, even if simply ended up abstaining he'd be damaging his reputation a great deal in the region.

I could admire the cleverness of it, and I was pleased Hasenbach was taking the Langevin problem seriously, but the nature of my own objections to this mess had not changed either.

"I understand why you want your trial, I really do," I admitted. "In your place, I'd be pushing for the same thing."

"Yet you are not in my place," the blue-eyed woman said, smiling thinly.

"No, I'm not," I said. "I'm speaking as the representative for Below's champions. And Procer simply isn't trusted enough for them to be comfortable with it having the authority to hang them."

Hasenbach actually tended to be held in high esteem by the more intellectual of my lot, as a ruler whose knack for legal manoeuvring and diplomacy had led to remarkable achievements involving relatively little warfare, but not even the most admiring would want the Highest Assembly to have so much as a speck of authority over them. Even the other side of the fence, Hanno's crowd, was unlikely to have a much better opinion of such a measure. Heroes tended to see laws and crowns as obstructive, when they weren't the ones behind them, and Procer's rulers still had spectacularly bad reputation abroad for the most part.

"That reluctance is not unearned," Cordelia said, "yet it, too, must have limits. Minor crimes such as theft and assault I will not balk at leaving to the Terms, in the same way that an army in the field is subject to military justice and not that of a

prince. Yet I cannot allow attempted regicide on Proceran soil without having it face Proceran justice. It would undermine the peace of the entire realm, establishing for all to see that Chosen and Damned live under different laws than the rest."

And that would go over significantly worse in the Principate than it would back home, where centuries of Good Kings and Wizards of the West had associated Names with authority, or even Praes – where being in a realm of your own, untouchable by your lessers, was half the draw of being Named in the first place. In Procer the people had an expectation that the law would apply to even rulers, if perhaps not quite as comprehensively, so the Red Axe slipping the net would be sure to cause resentment. It was still better than the alternative, in my opinion.

"They do live under different laws, until the war is over," I bluntly said. "They're called the Terms. They are unfair, set apart their members from everyone else and even offer amnesty to monsters, but they are also what has allowed us to muster more than seventy Named to the defence of Procer. There's a price to bringing in that kind of help, especially given the lack of trust between most parties involved. Going back on the nature of the Terms now will cause desertions. 'You will be under the protection of the Terms' does not have quite the same ring to it when 'unless it becomes politically inconvenient' gets added."

Heroes would at least take infringement there better than villains, who'd see this as Procer preparing the grounds for purges following the fall of Keter, but I suspected that tolerance would not survive for long. The Dominion heroes who'd not immediately balk at being subject to Proceran law – something the founders of Levant had actively warred against! – would sour on it the moment it put them in a situation where they had to willingly take punishment by a prince. The contingent from the Free Cities wouldn't be quite as incensed, but they were likely to band together for protection and it would all go to the Hells if the rulers of Procer started courting native heroes to bring into their personal orbit.

"I am no stranger to the tyranny of convenience, Catherine Foundling," Cordelia Hasenbach quietly said, "but that blade has ever cut both ways. You fear desertions? I fear *riots*. You fear the collapse of the fronts? I fear the collapse of *everything behind them*."

"Armies won't be enough to breach the walls of Keter, Cordelia Hasenbach," I quietly replied. "You'll need Named, bands of five that can triumph against impossible odds and the finest killers on Calernia to bring an end to the Dead King himself. Don't throw away your chance of winning the war from fear of having already lost it."

I matched her gaze, unflinching. She was not wrong, I thought, not really. But then neither was I. And behind the tension of the present I glimpsed something deeper. The legacy that this golden-haired daughter of the north wanted to leave behind, a nation of laws and trade and peace that would at last thrive without attempting to devour all it beheld. Its edges would scrape against those of my own craved-for legacy, if we were not careful. I wanted order forced onto the old war, the first war, the war that had begun the moment Creation did: Above and Below, the spinning coin of the divine wager. It was rules for those unearthly champions of black and white I wanted to set down, rules that went beyond borders and thrones, but my finest intentions would have to share the world with those same thrones they sought to surpass.

I did not hate what it was that Cordelia Hasenbach wanted to build, but I would not strip bare my own dream to gild hers.

"It has been some time," the First Prince eventually said, "since I have last been quite so thoroughly refused."

She'd not expected me to fold, tonight, but neither had she expected that I'd not be moved even an inch. I was not surprised, considering the boon she'd offered me if I saw things her way: accepting the Liesse Accords as they now stood, without further contest. It was something I would have paid dearly for, and might still. Yet in the end I was no more willing to weaken the foundation of the Accords before they were even signed than she had been willing to let the Choir of Judgement cast down a sentence on the very floor of the Highest Assembly.

"It gives me no pleasure to rebuff you," I honestly said. "But there are some days, some choices, where the only thing to be had is your pick of the shade of bleakness ahead."

The First Prince of Procer drank deep of her cup, her calm face like a too-small mask that exhaustion was peeking around the edges of. She saw, I thought as she turned her gaze to me, something to match that on my own face. The sum of too many half-nights, too many hard choices, too many victories that felt like defeats and defeats that felt like wounds. Sometimes it felt like I was sharp only because the world had whittled away everything but the sharpness. Rueful, she half-raised her cup towards me and I returned the gesture. We drank, for what else was there to do? The glasses were lowered all too soon.

"Is it easier," Cordelia softly asked, "when you are not born to it?"

Born to the crown, to the sword, to power. I looked down into my cup at the pale wine still remaining. I thought of the friends I'd buried, of the decisions that still sometimes haunted me in

the dark of night. There were more of either than I wanted there to be.

"No," I faintly replied. "Not unless you are an even harder woman than I thought."

The silence lingered for long moment between us, not entirely comfortable but neither unpleasant. I looked up at the painted ceiling, letting out a long breath.

"But if not us, then who?" I asked, a smile quirking my lips.

I lowered my head to find her studying me quite closely, face grown serious.

"You might yet be my enemy, I think," the First Prince said.

It was true, so I did not deny it. In the end there was peace and then there was *peace*. It was not yet decided which of these we would have when the dust settled from Keter's fall.

"And still I find it easier to trust you than many I would call allies," Cordelia continued. "What a strange thing that is."

I almost laughed, for I knew exactly what she meant. Even if the day came where we were allies without doom having marched north to cement the pact, I'd consider her just as much of an opponent. A rival, perhaps, in the strangest of ways. The sky was not so large that there would be enough room for the full span of both our ambitions, and neither of us was above jostling.

"I imagine that on some nights," I half-smiled, "when we were girls, without ever knowing it we looked up at the same stars from different lands."

She inclined her head by the smallest of measures, and we left it at that.

Yet there was a whisper in my ear as the silence fell, pleased yet indistinct. Like a curl of smoke. And for the barest of moments I felt a warm breath against the back of my neck. A trick of the light had deepened the darkness in the corners of the hall and I fancied, just for that fleeting moment, that I glimpsed the silhouette of a great beast cast there from the shadows.

Ah, I thought, smiling a secret smile. *Are you back, old friend?*

My Name did not answer.

Not yet.

Interlude: Paragons

"To offer forgiveness to the unrepentant is as the sheep embracing the wolf."

– Hektor the Ecclesiast, Atalante preacher

Hanno had underestimated the depth of the troubles in the Arsenal.

It had already been an unpleasant surprise for providence to have failed him, not offering even the slightest of nudges otherwise when he'd decided to wait a few days before heading towards the Arsenal, but now it seemed that initial mistake had allowed several streaks of unpleasantness to take root. That Catherine would be as a scalded cat was only to be expected, given that she'd pitted her wits against the Wandering Bard and there was no victory to be had without a cost there. That could be worked around until it passed, which he trusted it would. That there would be distrust and discontent boiling up within the heroes as was not something he'd foreseen, at least not to such a grave extent. That Christophe de Pavanie's name never seemed to be far behind whenever a spot of discord was there to be found was even more unfortunate.

It had become the White Knight's habit to arrange for a great talk with all the heroes of a region whenever his travels allowed, so that they might vent their grievances before they could grow into formal complaints and frictions of character could be caught before they escalated, and it was without hesitation he followed the habit after coming to the Arsenal. There were nine heroes within these walls who bore Names, and most made good time when he sent for them. Still, extracting themselves from their occupations took longer for some than others. Hanno was not displeased by that, as them coming with waves allowed him to take a look at the currents binding them to one another. Roland, for example, came with the Vagrant Spear and the Forlorn Paladin.

The latter two of those three had spent more than a year as part of the Archer's band, while the Rogue Sorcerer was perhaps the hero who best got along with the Woe in particular and villains as a whole. There were some who called him soft on Below because of that, though his distinguished record had ensured it was just idle talk. That the Dominion heroine would keep company with Roland and the Forlorn Paladin was interesting, however. If she had felt uncomfortable under the Archer, starved of respectable company or mistreated, she would not have chosen those particular companions. As for the Forlorn Paladin himself, though he remained improbably cheerful despite his Name it was clear that he felt lost and that the Vagrant Spear was serving as an anchor. Hanno sympathized.

He had more memories than any man alive, and their loss was something he dreaded like little else.

The White Knight spoke with the first three heroes to arrive, little more than small talk about what they'd seen and done since their last parting, but before long others began to wander in. Though the Kingfisher Prince was not someone Hanno had ever met in person before, the Prince of Brus was hard to mistake for another – between the fanciful Alamans clothing and the elaborate hair ribbons, there was simply no other hero he could be mistaken *for*. The man had a reputation for charm that must have been true at least in part, for the often-taciturn Bitter Blacksmith was laughing as some unheard jest as he gallantly opened the door for her.

Though Hanno did not particularly consider himself the host of this gathering – he had not fetched the refreshments himself, or done anything at all save requesting the help of messengers and attendants – he still welcomed the pair into the room, returning the Prince of Brus' firm arm clasp and congratulating Helmgard for her impressive work on the sword he was not learning had been named the Severance. A shame. He'd been rather partial to the 'Severity', himself. It seemed a truer homage to the woman it had been forged from. There was hardly a ripple as the two Named joined the others, cordial smiles being offered up by those whose character so inclined them.

The Mirror Knight arrived rather late, considering that Christophe had been eager for a meeting like this one when they'd last spoken, but it was easy to see why. When the dark-haired hero arrived, it was with the Blessed Artificer and the Blade of Mercy at his side. He must have wanted the three of them to come together and so waited, though Hanno found that the Mirror Knight looked rather jittery underneath his attempt so seem calm. The White Knight almost frowned when he saw how uncomfortable young Antoine was, avoiding looking at the end of the table where Roland and the two heroines he'd come in with sat. Not, not Roland, Hanno decided. It was Sidonia in particular the younger man was avoiding looking at.

The Vagrant Spear did not gaze in their direction at all, as if noticing them was beneath her.

The Blessed Artificer strode forward with little apparent awareness of her companions' discomfort, offering Hanno himself a nod before settling in the chair by the Bitter Blacksmith's side. The two began to talk animatedly, and Christophe look almost miffed before he came to make his greetings. The White Knight took the time to speak with young Antoine for a bit, but the Blade of Mercy remained stiff and tight-lipped. Twice, in mere idle conversation, he redirected a casual question of Hanno's to the Mirror Knight. The Ashuran filed that away, refraining from

making assumptions but equally disinclined to simply ignore an oddity.

The Blind Maker was the last to arrive, the older man having been in the middle of delicate work when the messenger came and so unable to extract himself easily. He apologized, but no one felt slighted and so the matter was waved away. Hanno caught himself looking at the door, as if still waiting, and felt a pang of grief when he understood why. Nephele would not be coming, for she was dead. She'd perished in the fight against a demon, mere days ago, and so Hanno would never see his friend again. Hear her laugh, enjoy the sight of how she had come to *thrive* in the very place she had died defending. The dark-skinned man did not shy away from the grief, instead leaning into it. Let it pass through him.

The White Knight could not change what had been done, but he could keep Nephele alive within himself. Hanno's mother had been fond of a verse from her homeland, one that claimed all were born to two deaths: one in the flesh, one in the memories of those left behind. It was not in the Ashuran knight's ability to unmake the end of flesh, but in memory at least he could honour the woman who had been the Repentant Magister. Yet there was a time for grief and a time for the present, and now Hanno was called upon by the latter to set aside the former. He did so.

"I see were all here," the White Knight said, standing at the head of the table. "I am not unaware that there are many demands on your time, and so I thank you for indulging my request."

"We were long overdue a council of the Chosen, anyhow," the Blessed Artificer said.

Adanna of Smyrna had spoken with characteristic bluntness and so Hanno knew better than to take offence, though that did not stop some from eyeing her with irritation. Or dislike. Heroes were not above the vagaries of human interaction in the slightest. They were, if anything, more prone to falling into them. A consequence of strong personalities, Hanno had often thought, which were those that tended to come into Names to begin with.

"A council over what?" the Forlorn Paladin asked. "The messenger never said."

From the corners of his eye, Hanno saw that the Kingfisher Prince was carefully studying the heroes in the room. Looking, the White Knight suspected, for the invisible web of alliances and enmities that Alamans considered to be the foundation of all society. This one was a hero, the White Knight thought, but a prince as well. It would not do to forget that. The blue-eyed Prince of Brus caught Hanno's own watchful eye, and with a quirk of the lips offered a wink.

"This is to discuss the fate of the Red Axe, obviously," the Mirror Knight said.

"What is there to discuss, exactly?" the Rogue Sorcerer flatly asked.

"These talks are meant to allow you all to air grievances and worries," Hanno cut in as he sat down, voice serene. "If such worries concern the matter of the Red Axe, you are of course free to voice them."

"There's grievances enough for twenty to be aired," the Blessed Artificer said. "Most of them about the Black Queen's atrocious behaviour."

Hanno cocked his head to the side.

"The reports I received must have been incomplete, then," he said. "For I have read them and found little to fault her with."

That made a stir, though not a large one. He'd hardly said anything incendiary, besides. If Catherine had genuinely been at fault, it would have been his duty to act on it. If he had not, the reason why ought to be self-evident.

"This is ridiculous," Roland said. "We heroes in our little hidden room, discussing the Black Queen like we're some sort of secret cabal. If it came out, we'd be a laughingstock – or worse."

"You worry too much of how things might look, Rogue Sorcerer," the Mirror Knight said, contempt clear in his voice.

"You don't worry *enough*, Christophe," the Bitter Blacksmith sneered. "I don't care if she stepped on your toes, she's also sent troops to fight up in Twilight's Pass. You don't get to fuck that just because no one bothered to beat humility into you as a child."

The Mirror Knight looked not only surprised by Helmgard's words, but almost hurt. They were friends, the White Knight distantly recalled. But right now the Bitter Blacksmith was just seeing yet another Alamans posturing while her people died in droves, and that pulled on an older and deeper loyalty that anything friendship might earn of her.

"I choose not to believe that expecting civility of each other is being too ambitious," Hanno calmly said.

The Blacksmith looked away, but not without embarrassment first painting itself across her face. Christophe looked pleased and almost vindicated, though, which had not been Hanno's intent at all. It worried him that the other man seemed convinced that

there were sides to take instead of disagreements to be had. The difference might slight, at first, but the longer the path was the starker the difference would grow.

"Impugning each other's character is no more civil than insults," the White Knight plainly said. "I will add, however, that expecting Catherine Foundling to withdraw the aid she has offered because her actions are being questioned is not a defence of her. It is, in fact, the contrary."

The Kingfisher Prince cleared his throat.

"Considering grievances have been mentioned, I am curious to hear them," Prince Frederic Goethal said. "I was part of the defence myself, after all."

"You failed to hide the Red Axe from mere guards, then were laid down by your own ward," the Blessed Artificer said. "Hardly a participation."

Every single Alamans at the table looked appalled at her words, Hanno noted, though not necessarily because they disagreed with them. The Prince of Brus had an impressive martial reputation in the north, but he'd worked with few other Named and his showing during the assault on the Arsenal had been lackluster by some ways of looking at it. Hanno's esteem of the man had raised at his restraint when faced with bare swords and threats, but even on the side of Above there were some who measured success largely through body counts.

"Adanna, you're being insulting," the Bitter Blacksmith told her.

The golden-eyed artificer looked surprised.

"I meant no insult," she assured the prince. "Only that-"

Mercifully, Helmgard elbowed her before she could launch into an explanation that Hanno suspected would offer several additional insults. The dark-skinned man actually sympathized with Adanna a great deal, since he understood exactly where her occasional maladroitness came from: it was rather typical of Ashurans in general and citizens from higher tiers in particular. High Tyrian was a highly blunt language, compared to some on the continent, and most Ashurans who learned a second tongue had to unlearn habits that made them come across as very rude. Those born to higher tiers were also raised into believing that criticism of lower tiers was a civic duty, which could combine in unfortunate ways with other Ashuran customs. Captains, traders and diplomats were naturally taught how to avoid those pitfalls, but the Blessed Artificer was unlikely to have rubbed elbows with any of these in Smyrna – she would have moved in different, higher circles.

"No offence was taken," the Kingfisher Prince said, and it he was lying he hid it well. "Yet my question stands."

"I am curious as well," the White Knight said. "Though I want it to be clear that you are all free to speak, and I will not take you words as a formal complaint under the Terms unless you explicitly state otherwise."

"I was threatened with execution," the Blessed Artificer said.

The Rogue Sorcerer laughed, and not kindly.

"Tell them why," Roland said.

"It hardly matters," Adanna said. "The threat is the reason of my complaint."

"She nosed about an Arsenal project the Grand Alliance is going out of its way to keep secret, and then tried to bully the Black Queen into speaking about it in front of what turned out to be *at least two traitors*," Roland his aggressively even tone making it clear what he thought of the entire affair. "The specific threat then involved first gaining the approval of the Grand Alliance for your execution by the lawful means, as I recall."

Hanno's brow almost rose. It had been a misjudgement on Adanna's part to believe that the Black Queen would respond to this sort of a pressure, and an even greater misjudgement to resort to this sort of thing against an ally at all. He'd expected better of her.

"I can confirm there are projects under such stark secrecy that exist," the Kingfisher Prince said, "though I am not conversant with their exact nature."

The Blessed Artificer's lips thinned, though she did not argue.

"I have a complaint of my own," the Mirror Knight said.

Eyes moved to him and the dark-haired man smiled thinly.

"About the Rogue Sorcerer, and how he might as well be the mouthpiece of the Black Queen in this room," Christophe continued. "Go where you belong, Sorcerer. Go sit at her side, and let us get on with our duties at last without your *help*."

Roland's fingers clenched at his face paled in anger. Hanno genuinely could not remember ever seeing the mild-mannered man this furious.

"I do not know you, Alamans," the Blind Maker calmly said, his thick Arlesite accent tinging the words, "but your words fall well short of the chivalry your Choosing boasts of."

"That was ill-said," the Forlorn Paladin agreed, face grown serious.

Some were less courteous in their chiding.

"Fuck you, Christophe," Sidonia hissed. "I've been with the Lady for more than a year now, does that make me traitor too? Who the Hells are you to tell anyone to leave?"

Hanno pulled on his Name the slightest bit, then slapped his hand against the table. The sound was like a thunderclap in the small hall, and it drew shocked silence from all in it.

"Civility," the White Knight reminded them. "Be clearer on the nature of your complaint, Mirror Knight. Are you accusing the Rogue Sorcerer of having fallen from grace and become one of the Damned?"

That would, in fact, be a valid reason to ask for Roland's exclusion from this meeting. In practice it would be difficult to prove either way, but it hardly mattered since Hanno doubted the Mirror Knight would pursue his hasty words to the end. It was a profoundly serious accusation and there would be consequences to using so frivolously. That the Principate had used such methods frequently against heroes of opposing nations was one of the reason it had such a poor reputation with Named, and for a Proceran hero in particular to be seen using the same means would see him made a pariah among their kind.

"I did not speak those words," Christophe de Pavanie stiffly said.

"Then you should be more careful when you address others," Hanno frankly said. "If you did not mean to make that accusation, then all you did was offer an insult."

The Mirror Knight looked like he'd been slapped, but then he'd offered the same to the Rogue Sorcerer with intent nowhere as kindly meant. He must be made to understand that he should be choosing his words more carefully, not blurting out offences and then apologizing for them.

"Everyone knows the Sorcerer's thick as thieves with the Woe," the Blade of Mercy spoke up. "It's not a crime to say that, is it?"

"No," Hanno serenely replied. "Though neither is it a crime to have a cordial rapport with an ally, Antoine."

In truth, it would be a poison to this alliance if heroes came to believe that being on good terms with villains was a sort of betrayal. Perhaps if bands of five had remained entirely Below's or Above's it could have been borne, but that had not been the

case for some time now. The ability to forge a band out of Named of all allegiances was simply too potent a tool in the war against Keter to be easily discarded, and that meant heroes and villains must be able to maintain a degree of respect for each other.

"I have a grievance of my own, as it happens," the Rogue Sorcerer coldly said.

The anger was still in him, the White Knight saw. That boded ill, for Roland was sharper with wits and tongue than many were with steel.

"Why is Christophe of Pavanie still strutting about with the Severance?" Roland asked. "More than half a dozen of us worked on it, and a fortune was spent forging it. The peril has passed, Mirror Knight, so why do you still carry that priceless artefact with you like some ceremonial blade?"

"I am safekeeping it," the Mirror Knight harshly said.

"We've found no one else capable of using it," the Blessed Artificer shrugged. "Where else should it go?"

"It's an artefact meant to kill the Hidden Horror," the Bitter Blacksmith disagreed, "it should be under lock and behind wards, not lugged around."

"It hasn't been observed since it was taken up, has it?" the Blind Maker mused. "It should be, or we will not know how it takes to being used."

"It was taken up in a battle against great foes," the Vagrant Spear said. "And used worthily. It would be a grave dishonour to claim it back now."

The Mirror Knight threw her a look as surprised as it was grateful.

"Hear hear," the Forlorn Paladin said. "It is not a deed to be lightly gainsaid."

"Seven demons were slain with the blade in the Mirror Knight's hand," the Blade of Mercy fervently reminded them. "Seven. What fool would now give it to another, or put it back to rest?"

"I agree that Christophe is most fit to wield the Severance, given its temperament and his own talents," Hanno said. "I have already informed the Black Queen as much."

There was a moment of stillness in the room. Dismay on the Rogue Sorcerer's face, triumph on the Mirror Knight's – or was it relief?

"It must be returned, however," the White Knight continued. "It was taken up during a crisis for laudable reasons, but the crisis has passed. Until it is formally bestowed upon someone, it belongs to the Grand Alliance."

The scene of a moment earlier, reversed. Nothing about this, Hanno thought, ought to be taken personally. Diplomacy was setting the beat to the tune, not lesser and pettier considerations. He knew better than to believe it would not be taken personally regardless.

"The First Prince shares that belief," the Kingfisher Prince said. "I do as well, for that matter. You've fought mostly in Cleves, Mirror Knight, while the sword might be needed elsewhere. That front is the mildest of the three."

Christophe cast the prince an unfriendly glance, then turned to Hanno.

"Is this an order, White Knight?" he challenged.

He wanted, the dark-skinned man sensed, a confrontation. To make this about the two of them. That was disturbing, considering the White Knight had no enmity towards Christophe de Pavanie and had believe the opposite to be just as true.

"No," Hanno said. "I have told you my opinion. It will become an order if the signatory members of the Grand Alliance so decide, likely by vote. I expect the Severance will be assigned in the same manner."

The Vagrant Spear laughed.

"Should have been more careful who you insulted, Christophe," she said. "Even if your First Prince takes a shine to you, that's two out of three who'd rather burn than back you."

"I am sure Her Most Serene Highness will see reason, when properly made aware of the facts," the Mirror Knight said.

There was a certainty to his voice that Hanno would have found admirable were he not certain it was unwarranted. Though the White Knight had not lost the respect he'd found for the First Prince during the defense of Cleves, he'd since tempered it with appropriate caution. He could respect Cordelia Hasenbach without losing sight of the truth that she loved Procer more than she did most anything. It was why she now wanted the Red Axe to stand trial before the Highest Assembly, ignoring the protection promised the heroine by the Terms. The First Prince would not find many allies in this, unless he'd gravely misread Catherine so at the moment she was also highly unlikely to take a chance on championing Christophe de Pavanie.

"The Hasenbach will do what needs to be done," the Bitter Blacksmith bluntly said. "Whether it pleases you or not. That is their way."

There was an undertone of pride to the words, not quite hidden. Christophe looked upset, which led Hanno to suspect he had come into this hall expecting that Helmgard would support him in all things. The Ashuran was not the only one to notice.

"Is it because you've been fuckin Damned that you're so traitorous?" the Blade of Mercy bit out.

There was a beat of silence, the half a dozen people started talking at the same time. Sidonia was loudly laughing instead, Hanno noted, while the Kingfisher Prince was looking rather interested even as he kept his silence. The White Knight struck his palm against the table once more.

"Order," Hanno said. "Antoine, please apologize."

"I think not," the Blade of Mercy coldly said. "What did I say, save the truth?"

"So she took the Hunted Magician to bed," the Blessed Artificer replied, dismissive. "What of it? He's a comely man, and rather skilled in bedplay."

Several of the heroes choked in surprise. Hanno did not share their shock, benefitting from the perspective of a shared homeland. Adanna of Smyrna would likely equate having sex with a villain to a citizen of a higher tier doing the same with one of a lower tier, and so see nothing there to raise an eyebrow over. Considering marriages across tiers were exceedingly rare such affairs were usually purely physical, and the Blessed Artificer would be highly insulted should someone imply her judgement – or that of a friend, which Helmgard was – might be affected by such a thing.

"Is he?" the Vagrant Spear asked, leaning forward eagerly. "Elaborate."

The White Knight could not blame the Archer for that behaviour, sadly. She'd been this way since they first met and actually tended to be significantly worse when Rafaella was around for them rile each other up. The Dominion spirit of competition did not exclude revels.

"Adanna?" the Mirror Knight said, sounding horrified.

"I took up with him myself, for a while," the Blessed Artificer said.

"He thought we didn't know," Helmgard grinned. "We kept making appointments at the same time, you should have seen him panic and make those tortured excuses."

The White Knight cleared his throat.

"How any of us choose to share our beds is not anyone else's concern," Hanno said. "And not to be subject to insult. Antoine, *apologize.*"

For the first time that day, his voice hardened. The younger man froze at the sound, eyes going wide.

"He meant no insult, Helmgard," the Mirror Knight said, addressing the heroine directly.

The Bitter Blacksmith spat to the side.

"Only a boy needs others to speak for himself," she said, but curtly nodded.

Hanno caught her eye, raising an eyebrow in question, but she shook her head in denial. If she was satisfied, then he would pursue the matter no further.

"Are there any further grievances?" the White Knight asked.

"The Black Queen should not be a high officer of the Grand Alliance," the Mirror Knight flatly said.

The entire room went silent, as if breathing in simultaneously.

"That is not a grievance," Hanno noted.

"She's corrupt," Christophe de Pavanie said. "She made a deal with the Hunted Magician to let him off-"

"The Hunted Magician is to stand trial within the week," the White Knight corrected. "I am to be a member of the tribunal."

"Don't be obtuse," the Mirror Knight insisted, "she alone gets to decide the sentence, and she was arrogant enough to take her bribe while I was in the room. She thinks herself untouchable, White Knight."

"She alone stands as judge over the Damned, by the Terms we all agreed on," the Kingfisher Prince said. "To argue against that is to argue against their very existence."

Which by the way his tone had cooled, was not a stance that would endear anyone to the prince.

"What meaning is there in the Terms, if the one enforcing them on villains abuses her office?" the Mirror Knight said. "We've

offered amnesty to a parade of rapists and murderers but the Damned holding their leash is just as corrupt. Is it any wonder that the likes of the Red Axe strike against us?"

Christophe de Pavanie rose to his feet, animated and angry. The emotion did him no favours with some at the table, but it caught the attention of others. There had been doubts about the Terms from the beginning, after all, and two of the heroes who'd most stringently argued against their current form were in this hall – both Adanna and Christophe had been deeply opposed to the principle of villains policing themselves through the Black Queen. Enough that they'd threatened to walk, though it'd been an empty threat. It had been a point of principle back then, however. It'd since grown into a genuine belief for the Mirror Knight, it was plain to Hanno's eyes.

"We are losing the mandate of the Heavens," the Mirror Knight warned. "Every time we care more about the letter of a treaty than doing good, we lose ourselves a little more. That is Below's subtlest scheme: to make us embrace one evil in seeking the destruction of another."

Hanno had heard many people claim they understood the designs of the Heavens, over the years, and what their mandate for their children was. It was unfortunate that no degree of certainty seemed to prevent them from error, or mutual exclusivity in their claims. His attention, beyond the words being spoken, was on the heroes in the room. Some were skeptical, the White Knight thought as he studied the Named, but others were visibly in agreement. The Blade of Mercy, the Blessed Artificer. Reluctantly, the Bitter Blacksmith. Given the deep enmity she had with her brother, Hanno suspected that her leanings there were personally driven. She must be troubled by the thought that the reason she'd refrained from fighting her brother to the death, the Terms, might have been some trick of the Gods Below.

"Horseshit," the Vagrant Spear said. "The Red Axe killed the Wicked Enchanter. He was an animal of the worst kind, but what does that change? *She gave her word*. We all did. And now you're trying to wriggle out of it, like a worm on the hook."

"She got Nephele killed," Christophe de Pavanie hissed.

"No," the Blade of Mercy burst out.

Astonished, the Mirror Knight turned towards the younger man.

"I was there, it wasn't like that," Antoine insisted. "She lost soldiers, too, and it was the Hierophant who caught the demon. Not her, not us, him."

"Hierophant hasn't enough interest in people to get them killed on purpose," the Bitter Blacksmith grunted. "And he liked Nephele, I remember."

"Praesi hide their intentions skillfully," Adanna said.

She then withered under Helmgard's skeptical gaze.

"It is perhaps unlikely," she conceded. "And though she is a vicious brute, I'll admit I have some doubts the Black Queen would have attempted to arrange the death of an ally in the middle of a fight with a demon. She is a practical sort of monster, and more careful with her life than her cavalier manners would make you believe."

On the account of the pragmatism and cavalier manners, Hanno tended to agree. Catherine was also savagely protective of those she considered in her care, whether they were objectively deserving of that protection or not, so that she might have arranged for Nephele to die was... improbable. Not impossible, of course, and he was willing to hear out Christophe, but he was more inclined to believe in a misunderstanding than a conspiracy.

"What leads you to believe that the Repentant Magister was the victim of a plot?" the White Knight asked.

The Mirror Knight blinked, biting his lip.

"A library was burned, and in it there were two false Revenants who attacked us as we tried to rescue the Doddering Sage," he said. "It must have been the Black Queen and one of her servants, who else could it have been?"

"Even if you were right, how would that lead to scheming Nephele's murder?" the Rogue Sorcerer asked.

"She lied to us," Christophe said. "Do you not see?"

The Blind Maker cleared his throat. The Mirror Knight's face tightened with anger.

"And now you mock me, just as she did," he said. "Does no one else understand what she's doing to us even now?"

Hanno chose his words carefully, but perhaps too slowly. He was not the first to answer.

"So here we are," the Rogue Sorcerer quietly said. "The truth comes out at last. Nephele died and your pride was hurt, so now you're throwing a tantrum painted over with righteous speech. The part that disgusts me most, *Knight*, is that you are pretending you actually knew her. The way us here at the Arsenal did, we who shared years with her. You swagger around arrogating the loss of others, as if it makes you important and worth listening to."

Roland cast a look of icy contempt at the other hero.

"All it makes you is the most despicable sort of braggart," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "Have the decency of silence, Mirror Knight, and sit in your fucking chair."

"*Roland*," Hanno sharply said. "That's enough. Being insulted is no reason to return the treatment in kind, not amongst allies."

"You're a disgrace, Sorcerer," the Blade of Mercy spat.

"Swallow your tongue, boy," the Bitter Blacksmith harshly said. "You have already given away your right to speak."

"I will not speak to the Rogue Sorcerer's anger," the Forlorn Paladin said, "but his doubts I'll admit to sharing. You cast grave accusations, Mirror Knight, but offer no proof. Even a villain is due more than that."

"This is all pointless talk, anyway," the Vagrant Spear exasperatedly said. "Even if every word you spoke was true, Christophe, what is it that could be done? You want to spank the Black Queen's bottoms until she learns about virtue? The moment one of us – any of us – attacks her, the Kingdom of Callow's armies will leave and let Procer burn to the ground."

"They have a duty," Christophe tightly said. "And I do not speak of forcing her to abdicate her crown, Sidonia. Is Lady Vivienne Dartwick not her heir? Let her replace the crooked queen as representative for the Damned, then."

"That is enough of that," Hanno said.

Eyes turned him.

"We do not rule the Grand Alliance," the White Knight evenly said. "We do not settle its affairs for it, much less meddle with its constituent crowns. We are servants of the Gods Above who have sworn an oath of war against the Hidden Horror."

Hanno swept his gaze across the room.

"We must remain aware of our limits," the White Knight said. "We are not deciding the fate of the Queen of Callow between us, or the fate of the Severance, much less who the representative for villains would be under rules that we have already given our oath to observe. If you have concerns, I will hear them. If you have grievances, I will act on them. But do not delude yourselves, not for a moment, that we can *dictate terms* to half of Calernia bound in alliance."

Few looked like they wanted to object, and none who dwelled in the Arsenal. They understood best, Hanno thought, the actual scale of something like the Grand Alliance. They'd seen it at

work, when this unearthly place had been carved out of nothing in less than a year. The others knew only their front, their battle, their struggle. It was human nature, Hanno knew, to reduce things to something that was easier to grasp. That did not make you uncomfortable about how very *small* you were. The Seraphim had stripped him of that, among their many gifts. The White Knight perfectly understood how insignificant a speck of dust he truly was, and that had allowed him a certain... clarity of sight, in some ways.

"You're going to kill the Red Axe."

Hanno turned a calm gaze to the Mirror Knight, whose green eyes had gone cold.

"I am," the White Knight agreed. "If a law cannot be borne, let it not be borne. I will not worship at the altar of our imperfections and pretend it is infallible. But if it is to stand, if it is to be heeded, there cannot be *exceptions*."

Hanno did not judge, for that was not his place even bereft the guidance of the Seraphim, but he was neither blind nor deaf. He would act as he must, knowing his actions to be blind and imperfect. Christophe de Pavanie rose to his feet. Slowly, inexorably.

"No," the Mirror Knight harshly said. "I will not allow it."

Those were not, the White Knight thought, words that could be taken back.

Interlude: Epitomes

"For though the Gods Above laid down the path of righteousness for all to see, so did the Gods Below then lay down a hundred others that look just like it."

– Extract from the 'Truths of the Shore', a collection of the teachings of Arianna Galadon (considered holy text only in Procer)

Hanno would have to be very careful, to ensure Christophe de Pavanie was alive by the end of this.

Even as half a dozen shouts erupted in the wake of the Mirror Knight's challenge, the dark-skinned man wondered if he should first have spoken with the other knight alone. No, he decided. That, too, would have been a mistake. It would have been treating Christophe like a sickness to be quarantined instead of comrade whose doubts needed to be allayed. Hanno was no more lord over heroes than heroes were lords over Creation, and though the demands of experience often saw him walk the fine line between stewardship and government he must never cross it willingly.

"*Sit down*, Christophe," the Vagrant Spear called out, "this is-"

"- ful Gods, I will punch the sense back int-"

"Silence," the White Knight said.

The ripple of power in his voice sucked the cacophony out of the room, as if by magic. The Mirror Knight stood ramrod straight, as if the outpouring of anger had been a matter of indifference to him, but the slight hunch to his shoulders spoke otherwise. Still, for all the red colouring his cheeks Christophe did not desist. Pride was the stone around his neck, and now Hanno would have to find a way do ensure it did not end up drowning him. First, however, the venom must be drawn out. The White Knight did not rise to his feet, or react beyond turning his head to properly address the other Named. Christophe watched him with strained eyes, his light brown hair harried.

The angle of his arms ensured the polished bracers he wore on his wrists reflected only a muddled haze.

"Let us avoid misunderstandings," Hanno calmly said. "What is it that you mean, Christophe, by 'I will not allow it'?"

"How many of us need to die before you face the truth of what you made us part of?" the Mirror Knight said. "The Exalted Poet was shot in the back by one of the Woe, and who here has said even a word of it?"

"He was a traitor," the Blessed Artificer coldly said. "Good riddance."

She looked more conflicted that her words might indicate, Hanno thought, but here and now she'd chosen anger over qualms. Few in the rooms shared her apprehensions, given that the man had been seen working with the fae of the Court of Autumn. Whatever his reasons, he'd sided with creatures that had slain soldiers and broken works dedicated to the end of the Dead King. That in the process he'd tried to betray two heroes had seen his memory grow increasingly reviled: the Vagrant Spear's face had gone icy at the mention of the Name, for she was Levantine as well and had taken the betrayal as a slight on the honour of Levant as a whole.

"Traitor to what, *exactly*?" Christophe de Pavanie said, voice just short of a shout. "To the rules and designs of a Damned? To 'terms' that would see us murder a woman for slaying her own rapist?"

"You have not answered the White Knight's question," the Kingfisher Prince cut in, voice measured. "Are you threatening to take up arms to enforce your will, Christophe de Pavanie?"

The fair-haired prince's hand had slipped, ever so slightly towards the sword at his hip. Hanno thought better of his comrades than to expect they would brawl like tavern drunks but, should there be fighting, he suspected it was not the Prince of Brus that would be the victor there. The Kingfisher Prince's role was a martial one, but also soldierly in nature. He could turn a company of riders into an unbreakable lance or fight as a champion for his host, but he would not be the equal of the Mirror Knight in a duel.

"Let him speak," the Forlorn Paladin hesitantly said. "Or has it now become a sin to even speak against the Terms?"

"Why bother? This isn't a vote," the Bitter Blacksmith bluntly replied. "No point in pretending otherwise, the Terms are there to stay. We can whine about it all we like, but at the end of the day I'd rather share a room with a villain than a Revenant."

"How often are we going to be made to bow our heads using that argument?" the Mirror Knight asked, turning to her and sweeping the room with his gaze. "Accept this, or the Dead King takes us all. So first we welcome crooks. Then we welcome thieves, then rapists, then murderers – and Gods only know what comes after that. What single thing can we not be made to swallow, when it is put to contrast with the end of days?"

"Spoken like a child of summer," the Bitter Blacksmith said, tone gone hard. "There is no bargain to be had with the night: do what needs to be done or disappear."

She was not the only here there to have doubts, though Christophe's appeal had not been without impact. Neither was it without sense, Hanno knew. It was all too easy to justify all manners of cruelty by drawing some invisible path linking their avoidance to the victory of Keter. Yet that was no excuse to ignore what still lay just beyond the horizon, waiting for a misstep. It did not surprise the Ashuran that it was Roland who gave further answer, for few among them better understood what still lay ahead of them all.

"We contrast with the end of days," the Rogue Sorcerer thinly said, "because the end of days is looming. It is not a rhetorical device, Mirror Knight. It's what happens this winter if we make too many mistakes."

"We've won wars like this one before," the Blessed Artificer disagreed. "And won them without destroying what we are."

"We haven't," the Vagrant Spear said. "This many soldiers, this many Bestowed, and all we can do is hold? No one's had a war like this in, maybe not since the Empress Most Dread."

Even in Levant the memory of Triumphant had not quite faded. Hundreds of thousands had died in the creation of the Titan's Pond, and most of them had not been Gigantes. Neither had they been Levantines, not exactly, but they had been kin to those tribes that would one day become the Dominion of Levant. It was a good conversation to have, what was being said, and a necessary one. Yet it had strayed from the words that first set it into motion. This was not happenstance.

"Fear, Christophe," Hanno said, and his voice cut through the room. "That is what I see now. You spoke words, and now you fear them."

The green-eyed man turned a burning glare towards him.

"You can retract them," the Ashuran man continued. "Spoken in heat, they can be set aside as the heat fades. Or you can stand by them, if that is your choice. But this pretence that they were not spoken is beneath everyone in this room. Let it end."

He simply could not leave the venom to linger in the flesh, much as it would be painful to squeeze it out. Else Christophe would leave this room believing that he could keep challenging the powers of the Grand Alliance without consequence, that a Name and a sword made him invincible. He was failing to see the power of the enemies he was making, how even the popular sentiment attached to his fame could turn with the wind. If the Army of Callow and the Firstborn left the fronts over his affronts and it was made known why, how long would it take for every throat from Rhenia to Tenerife to begin howling for the blood of Christophe de Pavanie? There were some who believed that the Black Queen had gone tame, lost her bite, but the White Knight knew better.

There was a saying, in Ashur, that a lioness in her lair was twice as deadly as one in the field.

"I will not allow anyone to kill the Red Axe," the Mirror Knight said, "not when-"

"That is treason," the Kingfisher Prince flatly interrupted. "You would be taking up arms against the First Prince and the Highest Assembly, never mind the rest of the Grand Alliance."

It was a mark of the respect afforded the man by those in the room that no one had even considered complaining that he was the First Prince's eyes and ears here, even though he'd more often mentioned the opinion of Cordelia Hasenbach than his own. Of course, those that did not notice would be more inclined to take it as their man in Highest Assembly sharing knowledge with them than the other way around. Which made it all the more pointed that the Rogue Sorcerer, by simple virtue of speaking up for restraint and the Terms, had been accused of being Catherine's creature. The taint associated with magic in these lands was, the

White Knight had often thought, one of the most insidious poisons he'd ever seen.

"Taking up arms?" Roland quietly said. "No. Taking up arms is for an army, or at least an armed band. When a single man does it, that's just called committing a crime."

He'd meant to impress the pointlessness of such a stand, perhaps, but for once the other hero had misread the room. It'd been taken as a challenge instead and Named were taught to answer challenges only one way. Another chair clattered back.

"He would not be alone," the Blade of Mercy said.

The young man looked both thrilled and terrified, taking a stand with someone he admired yet uncertain as to the consequences. The heat was rising in the room, and even those not all that inclined to agree with Christophe's arguments would be feeling a strange leaning towards him right now. Adanna, Sidonia and even the Forlorn Paladin looked troubled by the turn things had taken. *We are trained to this, Hanno thought. Conditioned. To side with the underdog, the dark horse. Most of us have been in that place, once in our lives, and it calls to us still.* This, though, he could and would nip in the bud.

"How," the White Knight calmly said, "will you prevent the execution of the Red Axe?"

There was a heartbeat of stillness. Hanno deliberately looked at the pommel of the Severance, leaving his gaze to linger.

"Is that how?" he asked. "Will you cut me down, Christophe?"

"I will not kill you," the Mirror Knight said, "unless you force me to."

And like that, he lost the room and the story along with it. He was no longer the rebel fighting tyranny: he was a man threatening to kill a comrade to get his way.

"Do you so badly crave to be part of injustice, Hanno of Arwad?" the Mirror Knight said. "They wouldn't even let me speak with the Red Axe, did you know? Black Queen's orders. She's to be butchered in some dark room-"

"After a trial is held," the White Knight calmly replied. "After I listen to the evidence, determine guilt, pass my sentence and carry it out. Which will be, almost certainly, death. That she killed the Wicked Enchanter and attempted to kill the Kingfisher Prince is not in doubt, it is established fact."

The latter man was keeping a close eye on them all, Hanno found. He'd spoken little but missed nothing. Frederic Goethal, the

White Knight decided, had not come today to steer the conversation one way or another but to mark the positions and allegiances of his fellow heroes. And while the man was as canny as any prince of Procer, Hanno had no doubt that this was the stratagem of shrewder mind still. Cordelia Hasenbach liked to know the full lay of the board, before she cast her dice.

"She was used by the Wandering Bard," the Mirror Knight said, "as many of us were. And yet Chosen must die for this offence, while the Black Queen will let off her Damned with a slap on the wrist. And these are the rules you would have us heed?"

Hanno cocked his head to the side. There was no point, he thought, in continuing to argue that Catherine had yet to render any judgement and that she would be holding trials over rather different breaches of the Terms besides. Continuing to drown in details would resolve nothing, for the Mirror Knight was not truly looking to debate anything. His fingers were grasping for a stone to throw, not an answer to consider.

"Yes," Hanno said.

Christophe visibly stalled at the unexpected reply.

"I will pass judgement over the Red Axe, and carry out the sentence," the White Knight explicitly stated. "In this matter I cannot be swayed or bargained with. It will be done, that is all. Do you now intend to kill me, Christophe? I will not be fighting you, if that is your choice, so strike at your leisure."

The eyes of every single person in the room went to the Mirror Knight, whose face had gone red. His hand was on the pommel of the sword, but he'd not unsheathed it. Even the Blade of Mercy took a step back from him. Antoine was not the sort of young man to let even admiration overcome a reluctance to kill in cold blood.

"Let us assume you do kill me," Hanno gently said. "What happens then, do you think? Will the Grand Alliance let the Red Axe go free?"

"It is the representative for the Chosen that would pass sentence over her," the Mirror Knight harshly said. "Do not now pretend otherwise."

"And killing me would make you the representative?" Hanno asked.

The dark-haired knight took a step back, as if struck.

"They would have to," he said, stumbling over the word. "It would be obvious that..."

"You would need the agreement of every constituent crown of the Grand Alliance," Hanno said. "Given that you believe the Black Queen to be scheming against us, why would she agree?"

The dark-skinned man leaned forward over the table.

"If she refuses," Hanno asked, "will you kill her too?"

"She's Damned," the Mirror Knight defended.

He took a step back anyway. Giving ground it had become impossible to defend. He would feel it, the way the room was turning against him. Even those he had considered to be his own followers, warped as such a thought was to even entertain.

"And if the First Prince refuses?" Hanno continued. "If the Holy Seljun does, after that? What then, Christophe? How many heads will you have to take before no one is left to argue with you?"

"I haven't killed anyone," the Mirror Knight said, voice gone faint. "It doesn't have to be me, the representative. It could be any of us so long as they see what you won't. What you can't, anymore."

The dark-haired knight's fingers tightened around the hilt of the sword. Hanno did not tense. Why would he? At the end of the day, he simply did not believe that he was facing someone capable of killing an unarmed man in cold blood.

"You are no longer the Sword of Judgement, White Knight," Christophe de Pavanie said. "The Seraphim have gone silent, you do not speak with their blessing. What sets you apart from any of us now, Hanno of Arwad?"

And there was his mistake, laid bare. The belief that the justice had ever been in Hanno, when it had always been in the Seraphim. Hanno had not become any blinder, by simple virtue of always having been blind.

"What sets us apart," Hanno of Arwad replied, "is that you are on your feet, with your hand on your sword."

The Mirror Knight flinched, fingers leaving the hilt of the Severance as if burned. It would be enough, Hanno prayed. Being shown himself in a mirror, bereft of all the little lies people told themselves to soften the edges of the world, it would be enough. Christophe was not a bad man, even at his worse. His mistakes were sculpted by pride and fear, but they rose from a bedrock of good intentions. And if it ended here, if Hanno had correctly walked the line once more, then this could end without any blood being spilled. Catherine would return to her usual mercenary pragmatism the moment she no longer felt cornered, the First Prince would withdraw if she felt the situation handled and

there was simply no one else that would care to contest with him over Christophe. Hanno caught sight of his own face on the Mirror Knight's bracers, the reflection fleeting but troublingly vivid for the moment it lasted. He had looked calm, the dark-skinned man thought, but also aloof. Almost indifferent.

The Ashuran felt the turn of the tide in the air, even thousands of miles away from any sea at all.

"You are not the only one allowed principles, White Knight," Christophe said. "You are willing to die over this? So am I. And if you will not free the Red Axe, *I will.*"

The Severance cleared the scabbard with a rising whistling sound, as if it were cutting the very air of the hall. The Mirror Knight's sleeve tore with fine cuts that looked like veins, but his polished braces remained untouched. Already he was learning to use the artefact, Hanno thought, though if not for the whistling the Severance would hardly have looked like one. The arming sword, for all its power, was not a fantastical sight. Its steel was fine and touched with small, shadowy patterns like trails of smoke that could hardly be seen with the naked eye, but it neither glowed nor shone, or boasted some fanciful enchantment. The guard was straight, the pommel an angular globe, and the handle covered by an iron grip. The sheath was an ornate thing, but the sword? No, the sword would not have suffered ornament. There was still enough of Laurence de Montfort in there such frivolity would have been carved right through.

Three people rose to their feet in quick order – Sidonia, first, then the Kingfisher Prince and lastly Roland – but Hanno was not of them. He only met Christophe's green eyes, unblinking.

"Nothing of what you seek can be obtained using that," he said, gesturing towards the blade.

"You've drawn steel on allies," the Vagrant Spear said, tone icy as she palmed a knife. "Sheathe now, or you will be treated as a foe."

The Kingfisher Prince drew as well, sword coming out with a muted ring, and Roland pushed back his chair so he could have a clear line of fire for his sorceries. The Blade of Mercy had only a hunting knife at his hip but he drew that, falling to Mirror Knight's side and covering his flank.

"This is madness," the Blind Maker said. "We are Chosen, not-"

"Sheathe the sword, Mirror Knight," the Kingfisher Prince coolly interrupted. "And put it on the table: you have proved unfit to bear it."

"Enough," the White Knight said, finally rising to his feet.
"Christophe-"

Hanno saw, from the corner of his eye, Helmgard's eyes go flinty as she glared at the Mirror Knight. He was, damn him, still just a little too slow. The Bitter Blacksmith kicked the table into Christophe, half-flipping it, and the Hells broke loose. Hanno tried to catch it but it slipped through his fingers, and before he could do anything more the Severance had carved an eerily neat path through it. The Vagrant Spear was halfway into a leap, knife raised, but the Blade of Mercy made to stop her even as the Blind Maker scrabbled to get out of the way. Helmgard had already snatched up half the table and she swung it with little skill but enough strength to shatter stone – the White Knight, Light flickering around his hand, shattered it in her grip.

Antoine made to avoid the blind old man between himself and Sidonia and succeeded but at the cost of a stumble. The Vagrant Spear's foot hit his jaw and the young man went down, but before Sidonia could try to move on the Mirror Knight a streak of Light tossed by Adanna passed in front of her – it hit the edge of Christophe's left brace and most of it careened away, though the metal glowed with heat. The Kingfisher Prince weaved through the chaos with a dancer's grace, ducking under a flailing Helmgard and coming up against the Mirror Knight's flank. Sword met and the Alamans prince parried adeptly enough his sword was not simply sliced through, but in matters of might he was outmatched and had to take a step back.

Hanno did not let him press his attack, grabbing him by the back of the neck – the man started in complete surprise – and tossing him towards the back of the hall unceremoniously. The Blade of Mercy had gotten back on his feet and he tried to force back the Vagrant Spear but she turned the blow, caught his shoulder in a hold and forced him to his knees. Passing the knife into her free hand she twirled it as she readied a blow. Hanno, from where he stood, could see she meant to strike Antoine's temple with the pommel of her knife after flipping it. Yet from where the Mirror Knight stood, all that could be seen was the Blade of Mercy on his knees and the Vagrant Spear drawing back her arm for a blow.

The White Knight saw it all come together, as if he were looking down at it from above. Christophe's wrist rising as he prepared his own blow, stepping forward through flying shards of wood. Sidonia seeing the movement at the edge of her peripheral vision and her body trying to react – she lost her rhythm, and what would have been a blow of the pommel as it went down instead remained a strike with the point of the knife. And in turning towards the blow, what would have been a cut through her wrist instead passed through the front half of her face. It would kill her, sure as day, even if it had not been meant to.

The window to act would be slight, for all here were Named, but he was not among the least skilled of his kind. The White Knight moved with purpose, balancing it all on the span of a single breath. His left hand caught Sidonia's wrist before it could come all the way down, leaving to prick Antoine's skin just lightly enough no blood was drawn. And with his right he turned aside the Severance, forcing it to the side so that no life would be taken. The edge of the sword carved through the first two phalanges of his middle finger and through his ring and little finger before veering off, the Mirror Knight ending the blow before it cut into the ground.

Hanno had yet to draw his sword.

"No," Christophe hoarsely shouted, drawing back.

The White Knight's fingers dropped to the ground. The cut had been clean and painless, but it might still kill him if – Hanno resorted to an old trick let out a pulse of blinding Light, brute forcing the healing and hardening the skin irreparably. There'd be no mending what the Severance had cut, anyhow.

"Sheathe your blades," Hanno said, and his tone brooked no argument. "Every last one of you."

It had taken more than just Christophe de Pavanie for it to come to this.

"I-" the Mirror Knight stammered, "I didn't mean to-"

And before anyone could speak so much as a word, he bolted for the door. Hanno almost cursed. He'd expected anguish, not flight. This was potentially much worse. The door opened the other way but it had not been meant to resist Named and it broke with barely a touch as the Mirror Knight pushed through, the White Knight forcing aside the Vagrant Spear as she moved into his way. He flicked a glance back to the assembled heroes.

"By my authority under the Terms, I order that you all return to your quarters and remain there until sent for," Hanno said, tone forcefully calm.

He did not stay long enough for anybody to begin arguing, instead stepping into the halls of the Alcazar and catching sight of the Mirror Knight turning the corner. Christophe would have no destination, right now, but Hanno knew that the longer he ran with the sight of burning bridges at his back the more the Mirror Knight would look for a way to justify all of this, any of this. And that mean, right now, the Red Axe. If Christophe hurt or even accidentally killed guards breaking her out, Hanno knew there would be no saving his life. There would be no deal to be made, no bargain when so many heroes had broken so many roles. The tolerance from the Grand Alliance would run dry.

As things stood, there was only one way to settle this.

The White Knight breathed out and let Light flood his veins, hastening his steps. He scarred the stone as he turned the corner, Christophe not far ahead, and unclasped his sheathed sword from his belt. The Mirror Knight glanced back just in time to see the strike coming and twist around to face the White Knight, narrowly avoiding the blow at the back of his knee that would have had him tumbling.

"It didn't have to be like this," Christophe pleadingly said. "You could have listened, and you can still-"

"I'm sorry," Hanno said. "But now it has to end a certain way."

If I do not show them I am capable of handling you physically, this can only end in your death. Christophe did not truly want to fight, even if his body reacted to being attacked, so his initial reaction was sloppy. The Severance was swung quickly and powerfully but with little skill, trying to cut through Hanno's own sheathed blade, but strength without precisions was meaningless. The White Knight took half a step back, then use the backfoot and a flicker of Light in what had once been the Flawless Fencer's favourite trick: the side of his sheath struck the Mirror Knight on the left cheek, smashing him to the side. The pain returned Christophe de Pavanie to the there and then, his eyes hardening.

"You lost a hand," the Mirror said. "Retire, before I must hurt you."

Hanno had lived through so many memories he hardly recalled whether he's originally been left-handed or right-handed, not that it mattered. He was perfectly capable of using either hand to wield a sword.

"Your worry does you honour," Hanno evenly said, "but it is unnecessary."

Something like anger flickered across the other knights' face and he rushed forward. A simple swing forced the White Knight back and with a half step he feigned use of the same trick – yet when Christophe threw a punch where his face would have been were he reiterating, instead the other man caught the Mirror Knight's wrist with the hand he'd freed by dropping his sheathed sword. Light scouring his veins, Hanno clenched his fingers around the bracers until they crumpled and threw his hip. Lifting Christophe de Pavanie, he smashed the other hero into the ground like a mace. The stone cracked rather than the Mirror Knight, but the tremor toppled several of the magelights hanging above. They toppled, several cracking and the light of the hall began flickering. Christophe shouted, Light glimmering over him, but Hanno called on it as well and threaded the two together.

Before the Mirror Knight understood what was happening, he seized the now single-entity Light and used it to strengthen both his kneecaps as Implacable Monk had been fond of doing – he then hammered his boot down into Christophe's throat, knowing that the Mirror Knight was too tough for it to kill him. The other man choked and Hanno repeated the process thrice, each time increasing strength as the stone fractured beneath them and the ground shook. The Mirror Knight's hand seized his ankle after the third time and he swung the Severance upwards and half-blind. Hanno leaned down, snatched up his sheathed sword and pragmatically slapped the other man in the eyes with the side of the sheath. Christophe yelped and released the foot, which returned to kick his chin at full strength.

The White Knight had not strengthened his kneecap this time, unfortunately, so while the strengthening on his limb held fine he felt the bone of his knee crack.

Pushing down the wave of pain he drew back a step, waiting for the Mirror Knight to get up on his knee before sweeping it – and, this time, smashing down on the wrist with his sheathed sword. The Severance clattered on the floor and Christophe screamed in pain and anger, catching the sheathed sword in his grip and effortlessly crushing it. Hanno released the hilt, but not quickly enough: he was tugged down enough that the Mirror Knight caught his tabard and dragged him even further down. Aware that wrestling with a man who might as well be made of steel would be foolish, the White Knight used his still-bloody mutilated hand to hook a finger into the Mirror Knight's mouth and drag the other man's face straight into his knee.

Christophe's nose broke, but so did Hanno's kneecap.

It bought him long enough, however. Catching the bloodied man by the back of the neck even as he dropped to his knees in pain, Hanno let the Light run loose through his veins until he could feel it filling him to the brim. He smashed the Mirror Knight's head into the ground, repeatedly, as Christophe struggled against the other hand keeping him from turning properly to fight. Hanno felt several of his bones fracture from the other hero's twisting about, but on the sixth impact Christophe de Pavanie finally fell unconscious. The Light slowly left him, leaving behind only waves of pain as the lights continued flickering and casting the fractured and bloodied stone into strange reliefs. The White Knight breathed in and out slowly for some time, but the sound of boots forced him to open them again. Gingerly, he took the sheath of the Severance from the Mirror Knight's side and slid the artefact back into it at the cost of only a few shallow cuts on his fingers.

Soldiers poured into the hallway from both sides, staying in the steady lights.

The legionaries of the Army of Callow were the easiest to recognize, the painted shields and red tabards that heralded some of the finest professional soldiers of Calernia putting a name to them just as surely as the unique mixture of orcs and humans of different hues. Yet there were other soldiers there, in colours less straightforward to place even though their long mail coats, *coiffe* and broad rim helm marked them as Proceran. Swords and spears came to the fore in good order, the now infamously deadly Callowan crossbowmen spreading out in the back. Quite a lot of trouble, Hanno thought, for only two men – only one of which was conscious, besides. Admittedly, he tiredly thought, they had made something of a ruckus.

Unfriendly eyes remained steady on him as he rose to his feet with a swallowed moan of pain, but the White Knight was hailed by no officer. He'd not expected to be, as it happened. There were only two people in the Arsenal who would have had the authority to mobilize troops like this, and it was unlike the First Prince of Procer to be so heavy-handed. With the crisp sound of steel-clad boots hitting stone, the legionaries smoothly split to the sides and a shadowed silhouette began limping her way towards him. Even through the helmets Hanno could glimpse the burning, violent devotion those soldiers had for Catherine Foundling. It was in the way they looked at her as she moved past them, in the way she stood taller and with straighter backs for her mere presence.

Some of the White Knight's colleagues worried of the Black Queen's power, of her fearsome mastery of Night, but that'd never been anything to him. It was strength, and strength failed. But the look in those soldiers' eyes, those orcs and Taghreb and Soninke and Callowans? That was a dangerous thing. Hanno knew faith when he saw it, after all. Faith in their saint of impossible victories, in their hard-handed goddess of blood and mud. That look in their eyes would still matter long after strength had faded into irrelevance.

Catherine Foundling limped forward, the uneven steps somehow ominous even without the sharp contrast of her absent staff against stone. The Queen of Callow was, to his great surprise, wearing a dress. Long-sleeved and lightly touched with silver thread, the black velvet suited her well and was even accented with a set of silver bracelets. The dark fabric complimented the tan of her skin, and her braid was rather more elaborate than the simple ponytail she usually kept her hair in. It was an odd sight, in the sense that he was unaccustomed to it, but it was returned to a semblance of normalcy by what followed.

The Archer, who sometimes filled Catherine's shadow in place of the Adjutant, stepped out from behind her queen and flicked her hand. A small packet was caught by the Queen of Callow, who then produced seemingly from nowhere a long pipe of Hanno suspected to

be genuine dragonbone and began stuffing it with wakeleaf. The White Knight studied the Archer, whose bow was not yet strung, and decided this would not be a confrontation. Deadly as the Ranger's most famous pupil was with her blades, it was a paltry thing compared to the threat she was with a bow in hand. Falling in slightly behind the Black Queen, the hard smile the Archer was offering him was revealed by the sudden flicker of flame of Catherine lighting her pipe. Within moments, she spat out a thick stream of acid smoke as the red embers lit up her face.

Wreathed by shadows and smoke, Catherine studied him with cool eyes as she closed the last of the distance. A moment of silence took hold between them, and she was the one to break it,

"Busy night?" the Black Queen asked, smiling as if she'd spoken a jest only she knew.

Chapter 34: Quickenings

"If you want something done right, steal it from someone who did."

– Dread Emperor Malevolent I, the Unhallowed

I'd become unfortunately familiar with a certain feeling over the years that was hard to describe, at least in Lower Miezana.

It was that mixture of relief and wincing that came from looking at a debacle but knowing at least it wasn't a catastrophe. Like if you came back one evening to find your barn was on fire, but at least the livestock wasn't in it. I'd told Akua this, once, after one too many times looking at the near wipe of a forward patrol that'd still caught a probe from Keter before it could do damage, and she'd answered with amusement that there was in fact an expression in Mthethwa for it. *Kutofa ushidi*, which more or less translated to 'victory in failure'. It was a recurring theme in Praesi plays, particularly their comedies, with the traditional protagonist of those being Dread Emperor Baneful – who'd never actually been emperor, only one of the claimants during the War of Thirteen Tyrants and One. He was notable mostly for somehow having managed to hang on until nearly the end with only a string of mitigated defeats to his name.

Akua could actually quote some passages from one of the more famous plays, *The Long Road to Ater*, and it'd been as endearing as it had been surreal to hear her chortle about Baneful accidentally poisoning his cousin instead of his husband – only to later find out that she'd been about to betray him. He had, Akua had gleefully explained, avoided his own assassination but only at the price of a feud with his distinctly unimpressed warlock brother-in-law, who promptly cursed him. Any play with that much murder in it would probably have been a tragedy instead, in Callow. Except if it were foreigners doing the dying.

Which was why I had rather mixed feelings, looking at the mutilated White Knight and the bloodied, unconscious body of the Mirror Knight. The Severance had been returned to the sheath and was now in Hanno's hands, but there was less of those than there used to be.

Three fingers lost on his right hand, though at least he'd kept the thumb and index. He'd still be able to write with it even as he waited for a prosthetic, though I did believe he was ambidextrous regardless.

"You might say that," the White Knight serenely replied.

Not quite so serene he was able to hide how he was trying not to put too much weight on his knees, gingerly shifting his footing. Though the cracked stone floor and the lack of cuts spoke to an overwhelming victory by Hanno of Arwad, I suspected it'd been a closer thing than it seemed. How many bones had he cracked just by hitting the other man? If the Mirror Knight had not fallen unconscious, it would have been the beginning of a downwards slide for the Sword of Judgement: I knew for a fact that his healing was shoddy, and not without adverse effects. Mind you, I thought as I pulled at my pipe and eyed Christophe de Pavanie's blatantly broken nose, he'd still won. And without using a blade, by the looks of it, which was impressive. *You were making a statement*, I thought, studying him openly. *That you can handle him on your own, and so there is no need for anyone to step in.*

It was about three fingers too late for that.

Indrani, who'd been at my back this whole time, let out a low whistle.

"Nice scrap," she praised. "But you missed a spot."

The way she trailed a finger across her throat while looking at the Mirror Knight made it clear what she meant by that. I didn't correct her, or indeed say anything at all, simply watching Hanno. I'd be a grave misstep for me to have even the slightest and most indirect of hands in the death of Christophe de Pavanie, as even the appearance of my involvement with the killing of a heroic opponent of mine would blow up in my face like a crate of sharpeners. If the White Knight was the one who took his head, though, that was a different story. While an argument could be made that the Mirror Knight was simply too useful and powerful a Named to execute, I was lukewarm to the prospect of keeping the man alive. Part of that was that he was a very direct threat to me, but there was also the fact that he'd just fucking cut up the representative for the heroes under the Terms.

The White Knight hadn't said anything, but after days at Hakram's bedside I was painfully familiar with what cuts made by the Severance looked like.

"The Mirror Knight breached the Terms," Hanno said, ignoring Indrani outright and looking straight at me. "But he has been subdued without lasting harm being done. I will now take him into custody, if you have no objection."

I spewed out a stream of smoke, watching it spin and writhe before me. I didn't want – and couldn't afford – my hands on any of this, but I balked at simply leaving the Mirror Knight in a cell without further supervision than what Hanno might judge fit to provide. On the other hand, what were my alternatives? I couldn't put him under a guard of my own without it looking like a villain had taken a hero prisoner and I sure as Hells wasn't going to leave him loose in the Arsenal. Besides, the White Knight might have asked if I had objections but he wasn't simply going to do whatever I asked. He'd listen to any grievances I had and try to address them, but Hanno wasn't going to roll over something like this and I had little appetite for picking a fight. I still tapped the side of my own hand, where the dark-skinned hero was now missing fingers.

"That requires consequences," I warned. "And do not expect to find much mercy in me."

Or Hasenbach, for that matter, I thought. The First Prince would have taken it a greater victory to bring the Mirror Knight to her way of seeing things than to quell him, until now, but this little episode would change things. The baggage he'd be bringing with him when going under her wing would begin outweighing his uses, to such a canny princess' eyes: anything he did after becoming an ally would reflect on her, and her position was too delicate to be able to afford much bumbling. Considering I spoke for Callow as well as Below's lot and the Dominion had little reason to be fond of the Mirror Knight, that boded ill for the man in question. Hanno would be the one to pass the sentence, in the end, but the White Knight no more operated in a vacuum than I did.

Hanno did not blink in the face of my stare, unmoved.

"The Terms will be upheld," the White Knight answered. "I will not let intentions excuse actions."

But, I thought, for though his eyes were calm they had hardened.

"But make no mistake, Catherine," the Sword of Judgement continued. "I will not sacrifice a good man for the sake of convenience. The Terms constrain, but they also protect."

"At three fingers the chance taken on a fool, you'll run out of one long before the other," Archer sardonically said.

Well, she wasn't wrong. I breathed in a mouthful of wakeleaf, savouring the burn I'd not allowed myself to indulge in when

sharing a room with the First Prince out of politeness. Through flickering lights, rows of soldiers on both sides awaiting only my command to bare steel, I watched the White Knight. Even without armour, even without either of the swords on him having left their scabbards, he felt dangerous. Not like a blade at my throat, for there was not a speck of hostility in his stance, but like a sharp stone under water. It didn't look like much until you tried to step on it, and by the time you felt the pain it was already too late. I'd trust him, I decided, at least for tonight. He had yet to disappoint me, and I'd not break that streak by forcing a fight that was not necessary. I hoped it would never be. But if it ever were, I would pick my grounds better than this.

I spat out the smoke, making my choice.

"I won't war over what *might* be," I said. "Take him, Hanno. But don't forget how many eyes are on you, either."

He inclined his head the slightest bit, not in concession but in acknowledgement.

"Have the Severance back in its room before night's over," I said, and it was not a suggestion.

On that I left him to his bloodied and bloody fool, Archer offering a singsong and almost taunting *good night*, and limped back to the ranks of my legionaries. They closed behind me seamlessly and I took aside the commanding officer long enough to order a line be sent to escort the White Knight as he carried the other Named to his holding cell. Some Proceran soldiers, I saw, were missing.

Cordelia would be getting a report soon enough, and tomorrow would bring consequences for all.

—

I woke up around what would have been dawn, were we still in Creation.

For all the weight of what had taken place yesterday — as much my conversations with the First Prince as the Mirror Knight's beating and imprisonment — I found relatively little to do when I woke. I broke my fast quickly and retreated to Hakram's room in the infirmary to see to what few affairs I had. I penned a recommendation to the First Army's general staff for Lieutenant Inger to be promoted to captain, for her exemplary service when commanding against a demon, knowing it'd likely end up on Juniper's desk. The First Army had been gutted to fill all sorts of needs, from garrisoning the Arsenal to organizing training camps and providing escorts for supply trains, which my marshal had been less than pleased by. It'd still been the natural pick,

even she had admitted that, considering that Juniper still couldn't work for more than a few hours a day without having... episodes.

Malicia had a lot to answer for. Tariq had seen to my old friend personally and assured me that eventually the damage that'd been done to her mind by the Empress' planted controls would mend itself, but that it would take time. The Hellhound still got more done in a slice of a day than most people did with a full one, and had violently resisted the notion of resting more fully even though it'd accelerate her recovery, but these days she was forced to rely on her general staff too much for the First to be a functional battlefield command. I could have named someone else to serve as general under her and lead on the field, but why offer that insult when I had need of soldiers for all sorts of detached duties? At this point even if tomorrow she was healed her soldiers would still be more useful in their current assignments, so it'd change nothing. Mind you, if we were to assault northern Hainaut come summer I'd want her to be part of the planning so she might have to leave her staff behind for a bit. Aisha would be politely furious at me for making her travel, but there was no helping it.

I saw to some minor correspondence after that, the sort that seemed to accrue like dust wherever I stayed for more than a day, and wrote a formal request for the Arsenal to begin working on prosthetics for Adjutant. I'd already gone to the Named directly and found both the Blind Maker and the Hunted Magician highly amenable – the latter in particular, since he wanted to buy his way back into my good graces – but it would be easier to shake loose rare substances if this was made formal. As Queen of Callow I had no problem paying for any of this from my treasury, but a lot of the more precious materials in the Arsenal were bought through the Grand Alliance instead of anyone's personal agents. It was half past Morning Bell that Archer strolled in to tell me of the day's first arrival, which I'd been expecting for some time: Vivienne was, at last, about to get here.

To my surprise, Masego had roused himself to welcome her in person as well. The three of us set out together, which drew eyes enough as we made our way through the halls. The Woe had something of a reputation.

"I'm glad you made time for this," I told Zeze. "It's been a while since you've seen her, right?"

"We scribed a fortnight ago," Masego contradicted.

He was, I supposed, technically correct. He usually was, especially so when it was most annoying for everyone else.

"In person, I mean," I specified.

I'd not seen Vivienne in person for... a little over a year, now? There'd been that conference in the Brabantine heartlands last winter, when I'd gone down in person to hasten along the negotiations over how the refugees were to be settled – the new Prince of Lyonis had been pushing for forced conscription of all those of fighting age, which would have been a disaster – when she'd sent word the process was being stalled. In all fairness, the Procerans hadn't even been the most obstructive people in that conference. That honour had belonged to the delegates for the Dominion, who'd been trying to argue that the mass of displaced were an issue of the Principate alone and not worth discussion by the Grand Alliance at all.

We'd been in the same small city, Malben, for about a week before I returned north to prepare for the offensive. We'd spent a few hours together on several evenings, aside from the time duty ensured we'd spend side by side, but in truth we'd simply been too damned busy to spend much time together. She just as much as I, which not that many people could claim. I'd effectively dropped all Callowan affairs and foreign diplomacy into Vivienne's lap, and while she'd taken to both admirably in tidier times both those duties would have warranted different appointments by sheer virtue of the work they represented. There was a reason that her personal staff had swelled by more than a dozen times over but I'd never once balked at signing onto the costs involved.

"Under those terms, it has been seventeen months," Hierophant replied. "Not since her official visit to the Arsenal."

"She actually likes the place, unlike some," Indrani said, glancing at me sideways. "Mind you, that might just be the Thief in her salivating at so much nifty stuff being kept in the same place."

"Vivienne would not steal from the Arsenal," Masego firmly said.

Aw, I thought, looking at him fondly. The faith there was a little touching.

"Given the authority Catherine has granted her, it would only count as a requisition," Hierophant told us.

A little less touching now, admittedly. Indrani snickered.

"Don't Procerans have a saying about thieves and crowns?" she said.

"Petty thieves hang, the great wear crowns," I quoted in Chantant.

Archer grinned at me.

"Give it a few years," she said, "and we'll proving that true."

I snorted, mildly amused. I'd never made a mystery of my intention to abdicate in favour of Vivienne after the war, at least not among the Woe – though it wasn't common knowledge outside them, to this day. It'd been with a mixture of pleasure and irritation that I'd realized that few of them actually cared. Archer was largely indifferent to crowns, and I suspected she fully intended on continuing send up bills to the royal palace even after it became Viv's, while Masego had actually been *pleased*. It'd give me more time to help him with a few things, he'd been happy to tell me. We'd never made a proper study of Night, and since I'd have no use for all that power I wielded he did have a few projects that could use the fuel... At least it'd not been too difficult to talk him into setting up shop at Cardinal when it was raised, which as a side-benefit ensured Indrani would have a permanent anchor there no matter where the wind ended up taking her.

"I'm still glad you made time," I told Zeze. "Unlike *some* here, you're actually busy."

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Cat," Indrani blithely said, "I'm sure that whole queen thing will pay off eventually."

"It pays for *you*, sullen wench," I grunted back. "Though I'm beginning to question the wisdom of that."

"I've never bought a drop of anything with Grand Alliance gold," she righteously assured me.

I raised an eyebrow. Did she really expect I'd fall for that?

"How about silver?" I pointedly asked.

A heartbeat of silence passed.

"Zeze's only here because he accidentally broke his spheres bothering elves," Archer said, shamelessly selling him out without even a speck of hesitation.

I mouthed at her she was not yet out of the woods, then turned a cocked brow to Masego.

"I made the spheres," Hierophant told me, a tad smugly. "And the spell that broke them. Therefore I did, in a sense, make time."

Huh. I'd be damned. Compared to his usual brand of sneakiness, that was positively devious. I was inclined to blame Roland for this. The Rogue Sorcerer was pretty tricky sort, for a man who went around in a leather coat shooting fire at people.

"You're spending too much time with Alamans," I told him.

"The only thing you should listen to them about is the kissing," Indrani agreed.

I shot her an amused look. Having recently basked in the luxury of displays of affections from her partner, it looked like she wasn't willing lose the goods quite to soon. The braided mage cocked his head to the side.

"But it was from two of you I learned to dissemble," Masego said, looking puzzled.

I swallowed a startled noise that was as appalled as it had been amused, because he'd been completely earnest about that. It was truly his most dangerous magic, I thought, that damned disarming earnestness.

"Catherine's a bad influence," Indrani told him. "The Grey Pilgrim said so that once, and that's basically just like angels saying it."

"Hear that?" I said, and allowed for a moment of silence. "That's the sound of your discretionary funds getting audited, Archer."

Naturally, she called me a brutal tyrant and the three of us managed to keep bickering all the way to the plaza where Vivienne would be translating in. Gods, but it was good to be home. It wasn't the same with just Indrani or Hakram, though they tried. We'd simply gone through too many crucibles as a band of five for it to ever feel truly complete without all of the Woe there. Not that we would be, even when Vivienne got here. Adjutant had yet to wake. With that thought dampening what had been a rising mood, I found myself limping down the same bloody set of stairs for what felt like the hundredth time. Wasn't there another access point without quite so many of those?

"It should all be slopes," I muttered under my breath. "Nice, gentle slopes."

The murderholes, siege engines and well-armed soldiers could stay, though. Those were always a good investment, in my experience. Indrani pretended she hadn't heard me, hiding her smile in her scarf, and the three of us settled at the bottom to wait for Vivienne. It would have been convenient for her to arrive immediately, but instead it took long enough we ended up playing dice on the floor to make the wait tolerable. Masego cheated with sorcery borrowed from one of the silver trinkets in his braids, but that was fine: they were Indrani's dice anyway, so they were loaded, and I'd yet to throw them without first weaving an illusion guaranteeing me the numbers I wanted.

Lady Vivienne Dartwick, heiress-designate to the crown of the Kingdom of Callow, arrived to the sadly not unprecedented sight of the Archer threatening to rise in rebellion if I didn't stop

abusing my powers to make her roll snake eyes – only to then roll another pair, as Masego was evidently finding her anger quite amusing and wasn't above using an aspect for petty indulgence.

"This is Grand Alliance property, you filthy gambling vagrants," Vivienne called out. "I'll have you tossed out."

The four mages that'd made the translation with her looked terrified, at least until I began laughing.

"She's cheating, too," Indrani complained. "It is a sad day indeed for the House of Foundling, that its head would resort to such sordid treachery."

"We were all cheating," Masego happily said, "you were simply the worst at it."

An offended squawk was his answer and I left them to it, instead turning to have a better look at my friend. I was struck, once more, with how little she now resembled the woman I'd first met in Summerholm all those years ago. In principle not much had changed: her hair was still dark brown, her eyes that pleasant blue-grey tone and her slender frame had yet to thicken. The hair was even longer than when I'd last seen her, and as was her habit kept in a milkmaid braid that evoked a crown, but it was the little details that made all the difference. She'd aged, not by much but enough that her face had grown mature. And though she was visibly tired, even in her blue riding dress and trousers there was a lightness to her that was the burning opposite of the anger she'd carried with her everywhere during her eyes as the Thief.

Losing her Name had been good for her in a lot of ways.

I limped up to her, leaning on my staff, and she met me halfway. I pulled her in close for a hug, enjoying how she was one of the few people close enough to me in height it felt like there was little difference there. Her grip was firm when she returned the embrace, and I noted with approval she'd kept in shape. Just because she'd traded the respectable form of theft that was burglary on rooftops for the organized form of theft that was taxation from a palace was no reason to let herself go. Mind you, Vivienne had always been whip-lean in a way that was from breeding as much as an active nightlife of skulking through alleys.

"Catherine," she smiled, after drawing back. "It's good to see you."

It'd been a while since I'd last felt pangs of attraction towards Vivienne, but now and then when she smiled like that I remembered why I'd felt them. It was a done thing, but not unsweet to look back on for all that it'd been entirely one-sided.

"And you," I replied. "Would that you could have gotten here sooner. I heard something about rains?"

She nodded.

"They flooded the roads," Vivienne said. "There were levees but they broke – no plot there, simply gone unrepaired for too long."

I grimaced. I doubted it'd be the only place where something like that had happened. Considering the dark picture that Hasenbach and Frederic had painted for me on the state of the Principate, I suspected that a truly staggering amount of maintenance work must have gone undone because there were more pressing needs to fill.

"We'll have our fill of plotting in here anyway, I think," I sighed. "Things had been moving quickly enough in here that I suspect even you won't have heard all of it."

The Jacks had people in the Arsenal, naturally, as did the Circle of Thorns. The Dominion did not have designated spies so much as captains sending regular reports, which was perhaps not too surprising – it was a lot less centralized than either Callow or Procer, and if I'd learned anything about spies since becoming queen it was that they cost a *lot* of fucking money. A lot more than, say, one of the major Levantine lords would be able to afford tossing into such an enterprise if they didn't want to fall behind their neighbours when it came to fielding soldiers. The Old Kingdom hadn't been all that different, even though the Fairfaxes hadn't been the largely symbolic leaders the Isbili still were. Nowadays we could afford the Jacks in part because nobility wasn't there to drain the pot anymore, so to speak. Callow hadn't gotten much richer, but a lot of more of its gold ended up in the royal treasury than before.

"I've no difficulty believing that," Vivienne grimly replied.

We parted ways entirely just in time for Indrani to squeeze in between us, throwing out her arms around our shoulders.

"Vivi," she grinned. "Long time no see."

The former thief snorted.

"Last time you gave me that grin it was after emptying my liquor cabinet," Vivienne said. "Though I'll admit it was a nice touch to fill the bottles back up with water."

"A lot harder than you'd think, too," Archer cheerfully said. "Especially considering how drunk I got from drinking all your liquor."

Masego's long fingers were laid on Indrani's shoulders and he gently moved her aside, freeing Vivienne at the price of leaving

me stuck with a pouting Archer. Hierophant offered her a smile and, as 'Drani and I watched expectantly, bent down to kiss Vivienne's cheeks one after the other. She froze, not answering even when Masego welcomed her to the Arsenal. The flabbergasted look on my fellow Callowan's face had been well worth the wait, I decided. She threw Indrani a confused and almost pleading look, which Archer answered with her usual shit-eating grin. She turned towards me after, perhaps expecting a greater degree of helpfulness coming from there.

"Zeze's been rubbing elbows with Alamans," I sagely said.

Which explained the kissing, at least, though the initiative to start doing it was all him.

"People keep repeating variations on that sentence," Masego said, sounding peeved. "As if it were some sort of conversational panacea. Shall I obtain such an elbow and carry it around so that I can behave outlandishly without facing questions?"

"There's probably a few still lying around the Graveyard," Indrani mused. "Couldn't be that hard to get our hands on one."

"I see that in some ways remarkably little has changed," Vivienne drily said, catching my eye.

I shrugged, offering her a small grin. If her days were anything like mine, and they most likely were, then this... lightness must be a balm on the soul. After hours of deciding life and death for thousands, of making ugly compromises and closing your eye to small evils, there was nothing quite like ribbing and idle talk with people you loved to remind yourself you were alive. A person, too, not just a collection of necessary decisions given a frame to inhabit. The four mages that'd translated with Vivienne had given us a wide berth, accurately guessing that the reunion of four of the Woe wasn't something to just stand around listening to, but she left us for a bit to thank them and request that she be informed when her personal affairs arrived. She'd come with several wagons, apparently, and only pulled ahead of them and her entourage when it came to crossing into the Arsenal itself. Zeze and Indrani took the lead in going up the stairs, leaving us behind in a conversation that was unlikely to be of much interest to either.

"We've got lots around the corner," I told her as we began our way up. "And it'll be coming at us quick."

"The trials, for one," Vivienne agreed.

She'd know about two, the Red Axe and the Hunted Magician, but there might be a third on the horizon she wouldn't have heard about. Whether the Mirror Knight would end up before a tribunal or not I couldn't be sure, but I suspected he would. Hanno would

want the Grand Alliance to have the opportunity to speak, if not sentence.

"The war council, too, which will start when Lord Marave gets here," I said.

She nodded.

"I take it the First Prince has spoken to you on the subject of the Mercantis troubles as well?" my heiress asked.

"She did. Their envoys due here in a few days, Hasenbach and I are to dazzle and scare them so they continue coughing up coin," I replied. "You heard about the Gigantes?"

"The Arsenal seemed like the natural location to entertain their envoy, this Ykines," she confirmed. "Considering they requested the White Knight personally it was almost a given it would have to happen now, before the two of you return to the front."

"I've limited hopes there, but even their scraps would be damnably useful," I said. "Talked about them with the White Knight, he has good insight. Hard to say when they'll get there, but I'm betting after the trials."

"Quite a few weeks," Vivienne drily said. "And to think we used to have the occasional restful month, you and I, where there was no especially urgent fire to put out."

"A lot more ground to cover these days," I mused, "and a lot more fires with it. There's also a last thing, now that I think of it, which ought to be soon-"

Behind us sorcery roiled as another translation into the Arsenal began. Ah, of course Creation would deign indulge me *now*. A moment later the Painted Knife and her band of five passed through the gate, bringing with them a secret the Dead King believed would chill our blood.

Well, I supposed it'd make something to chat about over lunch.

Chapter 35: Portents

"One who rears a tiger should not complain of stripes."
– Soninke saying

The Painted Knife's band had been one of the first we'd assembled, back in the first days under the Truce and Terms.

I'd been a given that a hero would have to lead it, as even with Hanno and the Pilgrim backing the Terms there would have been desertions if a villain had been put in charge of Above's precious little bastards. The Painted Knife, whose name was

Kallia, was a tall woman who wore elaborate red face paint and had been Tariq's personal recommendation for the task. A heroine but not from one of the Dominion's great lines, and one who tended to be more comfortable on the prowl than standing shoulder to shoulder in a shield wall. I'd wedged in a Proceran villain I'd thought it best to keep out of sight for a while, the Poisoner, since amnesty or not she'd killed a lot of nobles. She was a decent alchemist besides, which tended to be useful in all sorts of ways, though naturally to keep an eye on her the heroes had pushed for a Proceran hardcase known as the Relentless Magistrate to be added to the band.

The man was deeply unpleasant to anyone he considered to be a criminal but obsessed with respecting the letter of the law and a prodigious investigator, so I'd made my peace with it. To add a bit of bite to the band we'd rustled up the Grizzled Fantassin, though we'd had to appropriately pad her retirement fund to get her on board, and since I wasn't sending anyone hunting for old secrets without a dedicated mage I'd reluctantly parted with the Royal Conjurer. The Helikean mage was an escapee from Kairos' rise to power and remarkably flexible in ability – he was a more than decent combat mage as well as capable of subtler touches – so it'd been a real loss sending him out. He would have been a good fit at the Arsenal, or any of the fronts for that matter, but in my experience sending a band of five digging into ancient mysteries without *some* sort of magical support tended to result mostly in corpses.

Yet they'd returned, at long last, and all five of them were alive. Not without some missing parts – I saw with dismay that the Grizzled Fantassin was missing a finger, and from what I remembered of her contract that was going to put a dent in someone's savings – but the way they held themselves as they strolled out onto the expanse of stone caught my eye. Wary, yes, but that wariness was aimed outwards. The Poisoner, a plump and smiling middle-aged woman, stood close to the skinny and permanently stubbled Relentless Magistrate whose gaze was sweeping their surroundings without an eye being kept on the criminal he'd once been so scathing about. The Royal Conjurer was trusted to stand at the back without anyone feeling nervous, and the Grizzled Fantassin was standing next to the Painted Knife instead of slightly behind so that she'd be the one to eat an arrow if they got ambushed.

I knew that look, that way of standing together. How could I not, when the mere presence of three of the Woe at my side had me feeling lighter on my feet than I'd had in months? Those five gone through the crucible and come out on the other side changed. Bound to each other in some intangible way, and though it wouldn't make them like each other it had brought trust with it. A lot more precious a thing, that, in my opinion.

I liked a lot of people, after all, but trusted only a handful.

I wasn't the only one to see it. Vivienne had turned when I did, but it wasn't her who let out a low whistle. Archer, ever more perceptive than she seemed, was watching the five Named with narrowed eyes.

"Those five have had an interesting year, I bet," Indrani murmured.

I'd expected the Royal Conjurer would be eager for a different assignment, after this, but now I doubted it. A proper debrief would be needed, at some point, but I was personally more inclined to find something else important to send a proper band of five at than try to break it up. Practical considerations aside, my heart clenched in excitement. A band, a *real* band, with villains in it. That was... there were precedents for temporary truces, even the occasional cooperation, but never anything like this. Not that I knew of, anyway, and I'd made it my business to know.

"Catherine's associate is making his way here," Masego noted.

I flicked a glance upwards and found him at the top of the stairs, burning glass eyes staring at the unseen through the walls of the Arsenal.

"Which one?" I asked.

"The tolerable Ashuran one," Hierophant said, then added, "By which I do not meant the Blessed Artificer, to be clear."

Three amused looks were turned onto Zeze. His continuing feud with Adanna of Smyrna, now drained of the dangerous underlying tensions, had resumed being entertainingly petty. He meant Hanno, presumably, who I really should have expected to turn up the moment the Painted Knife's band came through. The White Knight had a general knack for being in the right place at the right time, even more so than most heroes. Mind you, providence was not absolute. It could be gamed, if you knew the right tricks. I looked down at the gathering Named, speaking with the mages who'd spelled them through, and grimaced as I realized it'd be rude not to greet them down there and instead continue up and wait there. Which meant I was going to have to go up and down these fucking stairs *again*.

Forget the Dead King: if I didn't get to take a sledgehammer to these... tyrannical stones before I died, I might just have to come back as a vengeful spectre.

"'Drani, go tell him to get a move on," I said. "Vivienne, do you remember their Names?"

Blue-grey eyes turned to me and she grimaced the slightest bit.

"All but one," she admitted. "The smiling one who looks like the village baker?"

"The Poisoner," I said, enjoying her slight wince. "One of mine."

"You don't say," Vivienne drily replied.

Admittedly the Name was not one that, uh, invited nuanced interpretation. The

"I don't know any of them," Masego informed us.

Neither of us bothered to pretend we were surprised. Painted Knife and her companions had begun the walk across the floor but we got to the bottom of the stairs before they did. The red-painted heroine offered me a salute, a fist against the chest, that I vaguely remembered being a gesture of respectful acknowledgement among Levantines.

"Black Queen," the Painted Knife greeted me. "We return."

"And I am glad of it," I replied, offering her a nod before turning my gaze on the others. "What you have found is eagerly awaited."

Especially since they'd refused to commit it to either scrying or letters, which would have gotten it to us months ago.

"Ah," a voice came from above. "I had been wondering why I was here."

Hanno looked pleased but not entirely surprised as he came down, Indrani idling at his side and only parting ways at the bottom to throw an arm around a tolerant Hierophant's shoulder.

"White Knight," the Painted Knife greeted, significantly warmer.

Still the same salute, though, so I decided not to feel too insulted. The Grizzled Fantassin cleared her throat, freeing her grey hair by removing her helm.

"This is all lovely, but after this long on the road I'd knife an angel for bed and a warm meal," she said, her Arlesite accent light and pleasant.

"Contrition's your choir," Archer advised. "Steer clear of Mercy, though, they're a little..."

I cleared my throat. The old soldier looked mostly amused, and Hanno patiently forgiving, but the Painted Knife was waiting to see if the Peregrine's own Choir was about to get insulted. Would a Levantine fight an honour duel over an angelic choir's

reputation? It said a lot about the Dominion that I could not reply with an immediate and definitive no, to be honest.

"We'll get you settled in," I said. "But for a few hours at most. There will be a council to receive your findings by Afternoon Bell at the latest."

Considering how the First Prince tended to pack her hours even more tightly than I did, I suspected she'd have trouble shaking loose the time for a proper debriefing before then anyway.

"Will Kallia speak for all of you?" Hanno asked. "Or will the report be given as a group?"

"As a group," the Painted Knife said, and there were nods all around.

I caught the Royal Conjurer's eye, cocking an eyebrow in question, but the tanned old man discreetly shook his head. No need for a separate talk between us, then.

"Good, it will simplify matters," I said. "Messengers will be sent to your rooms to inform you of when the council will take place."

I paused for a moment.

"Water's rationed in the Arsenal, but feel free to ask to be drawn a hot bath anyway," I said. "Under my authority, if need be,"

Groans of anticipatory pleasure were my answer.

"Many are temptations of Evil," the Relentless Magistrate gravely said.

His tone was serious, but the slight quirk of his lips gave the humour away.

"I assure you," the Poisoner said, "evil paid *much* better than the Grand Alliance."

Fair, I admitted even as the band let out the kind of small chuckles a fond but worn joke would get after a few months or a year of being bandied about. Exhausted as they were, we didn't linger around for small talk.

Ultimately my pride was my downfall, as I decided that asking Masego to levitate me over those fucking stairs would be too undignified.

—

I'd either overestimated how full Cordelia Hasenbach's schedule was or I'd underestimated how much she wanted to hear the report from the Painted Knife's band, because as soon as an hour past Noon Bell our little council was seated in one of the formal halls of the Arsenal.

We'd kept the numbers relatively low, since this was unlikely to be the sort of thing we wanted spread around and numbers were always the death of secrecy. There were three seats filled as a given – mine, Hanno's and Hasenbach's – but after that it'd been on strict basis of need. Vivienne, while tired and fresh off her own travels, was my heiress-designate so she'd naturally been brought in. Masego was as well, as my advisor on sorcery and the eldritch, and he'd not even needed to be talked into it. Hierophant had no interest in politics, but he'd always been like a magpie when it came to secrets. Hanno had brought in Roland and the Blessed Artificer, both of which had been hard to argue with. The Rogue Sorcerer was a generalist, when it came to magic, and Adanna of Smyrna understood Light in ways few others could.

I was pretty sure that the only reason she and Masego weren't trying to stare each other down was that the Artificer knew he didn't blink.

The First Prince had brought in Frederic, and I'd had a hard time placing why at first. The Prince of Brus was popular and a Hasenbach loyalist, but he wasn't exactly in the running for the throne even if she stepped down from it. Malanza was all but certain to get the chair, if it came to that. I liked Frederic, our little affair aside, but as far as I knew he didn't bring much to the table. Except, I realized after a moment, security. He was a Named that the First Prince knew would be on her side, if anything went wrong in this room where no guards would be allowed in. Given that he was a prince it was hard to argue with his presence, regardless, and one might argue that anyhow I'd already put my faith in the... discretion of the Kingfisher Prince. Hasenbach's other seat had been given to a middle-aged man by the name of Alvaro Corrales, who was introduced as a scholar and one of her secretaries.

He'd be taking the formal notes for the session, though Vivienne would be taking notes for my side as well.

Since Lord Yannu Marave had yet to arrive, the Dominion would go without a representative today. It wasn't ideal, but to be honest there simply wasn't anyone high-ranking enough from Levant on the premises. Anyone brought in – one of the few captains, most likely – would be lost for most of the conversation and require access to several more well-kept secrets just to understand most of what was going on. It wasn't going to be happening, Hasenbach and I had agreed. We'd keep the Painted Knife and her band here long enough that the Lord of Alava could hear the same report we

had, if a little later, and maybe offer a polite apology for the haste. Not a very sincere one, though. No one had been particularly inclined to delay until Marave got here, given the potential importance of the report and how long we'd been waiting for it. Sparse small talk was had as a courtesy for the short while we waited after the coming Named, but it'd barely gotten past greetings by the time the five were brought in.

A few hours of rest had visibly done them some good, I thought. Months on the road couldn't be cured with a catnap, but at least it'd taken the edge off and allowed them to change into clean clothes. By habit my eye sought weapons and found none, not that Named could ever truly be harmless. After the attendants escorted them down to the lower table – ours was up on platform, in a bit of pageantry – and the Painted Knife offered greetings for the band as a whole. Hasenbach took the lead in answering, even as I studied the five Named. The Poisoner looked uncomfortable, which was only to be expected since she'd once accepted a tidy sum to kill the First Prince even if she'd ultimately failed, but that the Relentless Magistrate looked the same caught my attention.

Whatever it was they'd found, it didn't sit well with the man.

"- if my fellow high officers have no objection?"

I'd kept half an ear on the talk, so I wasn't caught unawares. Cordelia was trying to move this along.

"None," I said.

"Agreed," Hanno replied.

The Painted Knife breathed out, and I wondered how much nervousness the thick face paint was actually hiding. The people in this room, the people she'd be addressing, were not without power or influence in the wider world.

"The mandate given us by the White Knight and the Black Queen was to find the truth of what took place long ago in the place known as the Verdant Hollow," Kallia of the Knife's Blood began.

It was Neshamah himself, during the conference in Salia, who'd suggested we should look into a place where the first Grey Pilgrim would have 'slain many men'. Paired with the insinuation that we owed Kairos Theodosian all our lives and that the Wandering Bard had been playing us for fools, it'd warranted investigation. Tariq himself had known of the existence of the hidden valley, this Verdant Hollow, and even negotiated with the Holy Seljun on our behalf to access the records of the secret records Isbili when it turned out that the White Knight could not see a single thing that'd taken place within the valley grounds through his aspect. After a look through the records the band of

five had chased after the trail like bloodhounds, but I'd heard very little of how they'd gone about it.

"We first tried the Verdant Hollow ourselves, using sorcery to try to bring forth a shade from those ancient days," the Painted Knife said. "It did not succeed."

She glanced at the Royal Conjurer, who cleared his throat and asked for permission to speak.

"Granted," I said.

"Old battlefields and sites of slaughter usually have stray spirits even when shades have faded, as the former often feed on the latter," the old man said, offering a grandfatherly smile. "There was not a trace of either, however, and my attempts to conjure up the dead failed in a manner that can only be called absolute."

At my left, I saw Masego lean forward in his seat.

"*Tabula rasa*?" Hierophant asked.

The wrinkled old mage nodded.

"Indeed, Lord Hierophant," he replied. "I drew the obvious conclusion."

"Angelic intervention," Roland said, voice quiet and troubled.

I sagely nodded, as if I'd known that all along. Although, the *tabula rasa* thing *did* vaguely ring a bell. Akua had once mentioned that the touch of angels on Creation tended to 'renew' the fabric of the Pattern, often erasing old damage, which was why even though Callow had been subjected to more than a few rituals it wasn't up to its neck in fae and devils all the time. Still, this was hardly a great revelation. If the first Pilgrim had called on an angel to tip the scales against a villain, it wasn't exactly unprecedented.

"It was clear there would be no shortcut, so we followed our other lead," Kallia of the Knife's Blood said. "The records of the Pilgrim's Blood spoke of survivors that fled north, into the Alavan hills, carrying wounded with them. We looked for graves along that path, combing the countryside."

A sideways look at the Grizzled Fantassin saw the older woman salute – towards Cordelia in particular, I noted – and speak out in a cadenced tone I recognized from my own years on campaign.

"There weren't any Dominion graves, Your Highness, but I recognized old markers in the tradition of the southern companies," she said. "It was my kind that got butchered in that

valley, and they buried their own as best they could while running away."

I'd not guessed it would be *fantassins* that'd gotten killed by the first Pilgrim, but that it would be Procerans had been something of a given. The founders of the Blood, immortalized in the epic poetry of the Anthem of Smoke, had been rebels against Proceran occupation.

"We attempted to summon forth the spirits from the graves, but there was a complication," the Painted Knife said.

"Someone had beaten us to it," the Royal Conjurer said, sounding amused. "Necromancy had already been used there, and recently."

"How recently?" Masego asked. "For how many corpses?"

"A month, five corpses," the old Helikean mage replied.

Zeze scoffed, and I let out a low whistle myself.

"That's a hell of a bleed," I said.

From the corner of my eye I saw Roland lean to the side to explain to the First Prince in a whisper what I'd learned from my own lessons in the Art. Usually the turn of the moon dispersed weak magical residue, so for it to still have been detectable after a month when there'd only been five corpses to raise meant that the caster had grossly overcast their spell. Usually either the mark of the incompetent and ignorant – Masego's own conclusion, obviously – or of people with a lot of power but little control.

"Fortunately, we were able to track the risen dead through the gift Bestowed upon of one of our own," the Painted Knife said.

The Relentless Magistrate, who I could not help but not had yet to shave, rose to offer us all a stiff bow.

"We followed the trail to a fishing village south of Malaga before it went cold," the man said, his strong Alamans accent showing even when speaking Chantant. "Upon investigation, Your Highness and Majesty, it turned out that villages in the region all had a few missing individuals. While the locals were disinclined to answer the questions of a Proceran magistrate, Lady Kallia's stature as one of the Blood bridged the gap and we figured out the common link was access to boats."

My brow rose.

"The Royal Conjurer and my humble self meanwhile found out that graves were being robbed in the area," the Poisoner tittered. "Which painted a damning picture, yes?"

Considering I'd heard that poisonous things tended to grow around Dominion barrows, I decided not to ask exactly *what* they'd been doing when finding that out.

"When another young man was abducted we followed," the Painted Knife said, "and after borrowing a boat and sailing across the Pond we made shore south of the Brocelian."

Which was, from what I recalled, one of the last largely unexplored stretches of Calernia by virtue of most people going into it dying ugly deaths. Ventures in there were profitable if you could handle yourself, though, given the amount of magical creatures and rare resources. The city of Tartessos should be an impoverished hole in the ground, going by simple geography, but trading in Brocelian goods had instead made it one of the great cities of Levant.

"Didn't even get to find our way before we got ambushed by undead," the Grizzled Fantassin sighed. "Although that was still better than the damned boat reeking of fish."

"It was clear we were on the right path, if the enemy was attempting to obstruct us," the Relentless Magistrate smiled, a small slice of teeth and malice.

"The Brocelian is not a forest to be tried without preparations," Hanno said. "Did you seek a guide?"

"One of the ambushers was a living man," the Painted Knife said. "And though terrified of his 'master' he agreed to serve as our guide after some convincing."

The Poisoner tittered, smiling girlishly.

"It is easier to bargain when one has the only antidote to be found for a thousand miles," she said.

That'd been an *impressively* creepy titter, I mulled to myself. The woman was talented.

"Ten silvers it was some Named undead trying to gather an army on the sly," I muttered under my breath.

"I will take that," Masego decided. "No one with that much bleed could possibly be competent enough to lead an army."

Ha, the sucker. Although it'd better not come out of the Arsenal budget, since that'd just be cycling my own coin around.

"Twenty it was trying to take over Levant," Vivienne offered under her own breath.

The White Knight turned a steady gaze onto us, and I felt vaguely ashamed at having been caught betting on this.

"I'll take the bet on the twenty," Hanno softly said, leaning towards us. "And thirty it has Barrow in the Name."

It was probably some sort of heresy to gamble with the White Knight, I thought, but then I *had* been Arch-heretic of the East. They couldn't reasonably expect me not to dabble at least a little.

"I'll take that bet," I snorted. "We've already got a Barrow Sword, the Gods Below wouldn't be that uninspired."

"It's Levant," Hanno drily replied, "there's always a barrow involved somehow."

A few gazes had turned towards us at the continued whispers, so I painted a solemn look onto my face. It'd been a serious, professional conversation we'd be having and there was no reason to even suspect otherwise.

"We pushed on into the woods, meeting little opposition as we went," the Painted Knife said.

"About a hundred zombies and just the most *horrid* manticore," the Grizzled Fantassin corrected.

"It was unusually unpleasant even by manticore standards," the Royal Conjuror agreed.

"We then found an army of the dead being gathered in the depths of the Brocelian, thousands of corpses being armed in the shade of the trees," the Painted Knife continued.

I cocked an eyebrow at Masego who looked mightily disgruntled at the revelation. Ten silvers for me, that was.

"We knocked out the prisoner and infiltrated the camp, where we learned that it was one of the Bestowed who was gathering a host," Kallia of the Knife's Blood said. "Though long dead, it had once been of the Tanja and wanted to claim rule of Malaga once more – Lord Razin Tanja was only titled through a loophole, it argued, and so it would rise the same."

It made me feel a little dirty inside to refer to Praes laws on anything, but for once the Dread Empire might just be the leading light there: it had pretty strict laws cutting out the undead of both inheritance and holding titles at all. It'd only taken like three civil wars to get there, too, which by Praesi standards was basically unanimous consent. Hanno glanced at Vivienne, who was to embarrassed to curse in front of the Sword of Judgement but looked like she very much wanted to. Malaga wasn't all of Levant, after all.

"He had proclaimed himself to be lord of the dead," the Relentless Magistrate said, sounding offended by the pretension.

"She," the Poisoner corrected.

"They named themselves the Barrow Lord," the Painted Knife cut in.

I cursed in Kharsum, which drew some gazes. Including the First Prince's. *Really, Below?* That was why Good kept winning, because they were such shits about it all. Now the White Knight was the one who'd won the most out of this whole blasphemous sidebar, and let that be a lesson: Above would always win so long as Below wasn't willing to spring for some proper Names. *Barrow Lord*, I scathingly thought. They might as well have just named the poor bastard 'Grave Noble', it was about as clever in the greater scheme of things. People were still looking at me, so I cleared my throat.

"I grieve for the people of Levant," I said, which strictly speaking wasn't a lie.

"I thank you for your kindness," the Painted Knife said, sounding surprised. "But the five of us were able to defeat the old dead. Though it refused to rest even when broken, the Poisoner was able to find a way to destroy it."

"Manticore venom is a powerful acid, when mixed with blood and rhododendron," the Poisoner smiled.

Well, that was an image. Masego and Roland both looked interested but were aware enough not to indulge their curiosity just now.

"And the corpses you had come there to find?" the First Prince calmly asked.

"We had destroyed several without knowing it," the Painted Knife admitted, "but the fifth made itself known."

"It proclaimed itself the new Barrow Lord," the Grizzled Fantassin snorted. "Which several other undead saw fit to argue with. It was all very Highest Ass-"

The older woman paled.

"-League of Free Cities," she hastily corrected, glancing sideways at the First Prince of Procer.

I was rather amused she did not so much as glance at Frederic, who was a sitting member of the Assembly as well.

"You captured your corpse, however, I take it?" Hanno asked.

Subtle laughter rippled through most of the band.

"I arrested him," the Relentless Magistrate defiantly said. "For false arrogation of noble title, which is a crime under Proceran law."

I choked at the bold assertion and was not alone in my surprise.

"Dead or not, he was a Proceran subject," the man insisted.

I was a little disturbed to see that Cordelia Hasenbach was *beaming* down at him, or at least as close to that as her face would allow.

"Is it actually illegal to be undead under Proceran law?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"It would fall under the heresy laws, in most cases," the First Prince told me. "Though in the four northern principalities undeath is considered high treason and acted upon as such."

"It's illegal for undead to do manual labour under the Accords, by the latest draft," Vivienne noted.

"We're going to need to make sure I don't accidentally qualify under the wording, given how often I've died," I told her under my breath.

"The ancient dead was convinced to surrender to the authority of the magistrate," the Painted Knife said. "After some aggressive persuasion. And after we ran away with him tied to the Grizzled Fantassin's back, we finally had our answers."

That caught everyone's attention.

"The mercenary companies were led by the White Knight of the time, a woman of Procer," Kallia of the Knife's Blood said, "and had been hunting the Grey Pilgrim for some time. They caught up to him and his fellow rebels in the Verdant Hollow."

Wait, it was a *heroine* he'd been fighting? I'd known that in the past the Principate had fielded the occasional hero when taking a swing at its neighbours, but I'd not expected a damned White Knight to end up serving as a bloodhound for insurgents. By the look on Hanno's face, he was less than happy to hear this but not outright surprised. I supposed he'd seen too many of the lives of his predecessors to hold any illusions about their infallibility.

"The fight went in the favour of the Pilgrim," the Painted Knife said. "Yet the White Knight would not have it. When defeat seemed to be looming, she called on the help of a Choir."

Oh, *fuck*. I did not like where this was headed. I did not like it at all.

"Which one?" Hanno calmly asked.

"Mercy," the Relentless Magistrate quietly said. "I... glimpsed, and it must have been Mercy."

Considering how brutal Tariq could get in the pursuit of greater goods, I could actually believe the ancient White Knight had been backed by the Ophanim in her quest. Suppress the rebellion and reform from the inside, maybe? It was an uncomfortably familiar refrain, and it might just be I was painting my own history on a blank canvas there. But she'd led fantassins instead of regulars, so perhaps it had been unkind to assume she'd been with the rapacious princes occupying Levant back then.

"And what happened after that?"

"Angels came," Kallia of the Knife's Blood said. "But a woman stepped in, and then the angels *left*."

Chapter 36: Trepidation

"It is traditional to kill to preserve your secrets, but I have found it more efficient to instead kill everyone who would be offended by the revelation."

– Dread Empress Massacre

A claim like that required elaboration and it was had. The long-dead fantassin had apparently been quite the chatty fellow once he got talking, so even though the Relentless Magistrate had only been cut into a few of his memories a fairly complete picture of the events could be had. None of us were all that concerned with the history of it all, though, not right now. So when the floor was opened for questions, it began with Hasenbach asking for more details about the intervention by the 'unknown woman'.

It was the Bard. *Of course* it was the fucking Bard, and I wasn't sure why any of us were wasting our time pretending otherwise.

"The White Knight called on the Brighteyed Lords," the Painted Knife said. "Those you know as the *Ophanim*. And they came down in a wave of burning light, to strike down the Grey Pilgrim, but even among the blinding radiance a silhouette could be seen to have appeared."

That had Intercessor written all over it, as far as I was concerned. There weren't a lot of people who could take a hit from an angel – I certainly couldn't, at least not without Sve Noc and the right story behind me – but the Wandering Bard was certain to be one of them. Even if it killed her, it wasn't like she'd *stay* dead.

"Was the woman ever identified, by either your prisoner or any others in the valley?" Hanno asked.

I snorted, ignoring the looks I got from some in the room.

"We all know who that is," I said, "and faces don't matter a whit to her. She'd had more of those than we've had meals."

"If I can hear even a fake name, I can search through old lives for a connection," the White Knight reminded me.

"I think you underestimate how good the old bird is at hiding her tracks," I bluntly replied. "But be my guest."

I'd have to remember to ask if they still had the dead fantassin about, though, since I could probably take those memories through Night and make of them something that could be seen by multiple people. Could be useful. The Painted Knife had patiently waited for us to finish speaking, but it was actually the Magistrate that she bid to answer Hanno's question.

"The prisoner never saw a face, though the silhouette was definitely a woman's and the timbre of her voice supports this," the Relentless Magistrate seriously said. "The Grey Pilgrim was not in the field of vision of the prisoner when this took place, as he was looking at the White Knight, which leaves us instead with an impression of her face as she reacted."

My brow rose. They'd been very thorough, I noted appreciatively, and they weren't hiding the imperfections of their results as some might be tempted to in front of such an influential audience.

"She looked surprised," the Relentless Magistrate said. "And she spoke, though the noise of Mercy's descent drowned it out. I believe, however, that by reading her lips I have pieced together what the word was. It is not, however, a certainty."

"Your work has been exemplary so far," the First Prince said, "and certainty is a rare thing indeed, in these matters."

"Agreed," I said, drumming my fingers against the tabletop. "On both counts."

The Royal Conjurer looked pleased, though the Poisoner was harder to read. My approval was something of a mixed bag for the rest, not unexpectedly.

"It was in Chantant," the Relentless Magistrate said. "*Trouveur*."

Which meant 'finder'. Huh, not exactly something I'd associate with the Bard. Not all at the high table seemed to share my opinion, though. At a glance both Proceran royals, Roland and the White Knight all seemed to be varying between grimness and understanding.

"I'm guessing I missed something," I noted.

Considering only the native speakers and Hanno – a filthy cheating cheater who cheated, because his aspect was bullshit – seemed to have caught it, I'd guess it was something Proceran. Probably specifically Alamans, as the scholar with the Arlesite name didn't seem to know about it either.

"In older Alamans traditions, a *trouveur* was something like a troubadour," the Rogue Sorcerer told me.

Oh, Roland. Both reliably competent and socially skilled, why hadn't Zeze figured out a way to make more of him yet? Still, would you just look at that. It might be a few centuries late but we'd caught the tail of the Wandering Bard at last. Whatever it was that'd gone down in the Verdant Hollow, she'd clearly not wanted anyone to know about it.

"I will attempt to confirm this independently," the White Knight said. "It may take some time, but it should not be impossible to learn more. Until then, however..."

"I am willing to operate on the assumption that it is the Intercessor we are dealing with," Cordelia agreed. "Queen Catherine?"

"I was sold the moment someone stepped in on Mercy in smiting mood," I drily replied. "But consider me formally in agreement, if that's what you're after."

It was, so we moved on with little ceremony. Masego had questions but no burning desire to ask them himself – at least not right now – so I did on his behalf.

"On the subject of the Ophanim being made to 'leave'," I said. "I've inquiries about some of the details."

It was the Magistrate who fielded answers once more, and he began by striking a cautious tone.

"The prisoner saw nothing of what took place after that, not until the light had dispersed and the soldiers fled," the dark-haired hero said.

Which their report had made clear enough. The fantassins led by the White Knight had skirmished with the warrior band led by the Grey Pilgrim over the span of an afternoon before it turned into a proper battle over a grassy slope. The battle had turned in the favour of the Levantines. Their training and equipment were both flatly inferior but they were *much* better at skirmishing than the mercenaries, so they'd softened up the fantassins over the afternoon.

When the fight had gone south for the Procerans, the White Knight had stepped back from the frontline and called on Mercy, which

was when our old friend had stepped in. Our sole witness had gone temporarily blind and only got his bearings later, running away with the survivors and wounded after they found the Levantines had not taken the opportunity to slaughter them while they were blind. Hierophant didn't want me to fill in the blanks in the history, though, he was after something else.

"I understand that," I said. "But, to be clear, even after the silhouette was seen the light *did* intensify?"

The man frowned, collecting his thoughts for a moment.

"That is correct, Your Majesty," the Relentless Magistrate said.

Masego let out what someone who loved him less than I did might have called a cackle.

"A limitation," Zeze said in Mtethwa. "Finally."

A surprising amount of people spoke that tongue, considering the side of the Whitecaps we were on, but it was still far from a full roster. I cleared my throat.

"Lord Hierophant has deduced something of import from the detail," I said. "Which he will now share with us."

Masego's Chantant was significantly better when listening than speaking, so it was in Lower Miezana he addressed the high table.

"The Choir of Mercy did strike at the valley," Hierophant said. "It explains the presence *tabula rasa* effect observed in the valley by the Royal Conjurer, which would not have been there if the Ophanim had not fully aligned with Creation."

Hanno was fairly learned in matters of sorcery, at least as much as someone without the Gift could be, but unlike me he didn't have the benefit of being familiar with the Praesi parlance in the art.

"If I understand correctly, Hierophant," the White Knight slowly said, "you are stating that Mercy did smite the Grey Pilgrim?"

"Yes," Masego bluntly replied.

Surprise flickered across half a dozen faces and from the corner of my eye I found that the Painted Knife was grinning, muttering *honour to the Blood* with an awed look on her face. Must have been nice for the national pride that the original Pilgrim had walked off Mercy's attentions – and where Procerans would have considered it an indication of virtue, with the Dominion it was a flip of the coin if they'd decide it'd been about pure strength instead. I was pretty sure we were about to get into the specifics of being smote by angels, which should run afoul of at least one Proceran heresy law, so I decided to give a warning.

"Deeper explanation will require drawing on learning that some deem to be blasphemous," I said. "I tend to find the academic tone there refreshing, but I'm not unaware that others differ in opinion."

Cordelia flicked a discreet glance at her secretary, who ceased writing.

"Given the situation, I believe such objections can be set aside," the First Prince of Procer mildly said. "Lord White?"

"I've no objection," Hanno said, sounding faintly amused.

Considering he'd once told me his own mother had kept to Below, I suspected he'd be harder to shock theologically than people would expect of him.

"Try to keep it concise," I told Masego in Kharsum. "And please don't talk about dissecting anything someone prays to."

"My children will eat your goats," he replied in the same, sounding a little miffed.

I threw him an offended look. There'd been no need for that sort of language, I was just giving advice. Given how important cattle was to the Tribes, that was actually a pretty brutal putdown for them – I'd seen orcs brawl over less. I bet it was Robber who'd taught him that one, though. The malevolent imp had an almost encyclopedic knowledge of taunts and insults in every tongue he was even slightly proficient in. I caught Hanno covering his mouth as if to hide a yawn – or a chuckle, I realized, since I'd forgotten he actually knew Kharsum.

"Angelic power is fundamentally like any other," Masego told everyone. "It has fixed rules and properties, however esoteric, which allows it to be measured and predicted. In this case, the *tabula rasa* observed means that there was a strike in the valley. That it does not seem to have caused any deaths means a property of that power was amended."

The First Prince of Procer observed him carefully.

"And that is... feasible, even for one who is Named?" she probed.

"I cannot think of another who could do this," Hanno admitted.

The Fallen Monk had been able to screw with Light, from what I recalled, but having fought him my opinion was that a scrap between him and an angel would have begun and ended with the sound 'splat'. The Intercessor wasn't some second-stringer with a grudge against priests, though.

"She's not like other Named," I said. "We've known that for some time. It's the reason we're tugging at threads that are literally centuries old."

Mind you, if it wasn't an aspect that let her do that I'd eat my own fingers. The Intercessor might be in a class of her own in some regards, but she wasn't beyond the constraints of being Named. Beating her thrice forced her away, she'd avoided the Hierarch like the plague and my money was on her having only three aspects just like the rest of us. One was the wandering trick, coming and going everywhere, and another had to be her sight for stories. That left whatever the Hells *this* was to look out for.

"Yet it is telling that the strike *did* land," Masego continued. "As she clearly did not want it to. It implies she does not have the ability to outright command angelic entities."

Which was the good news. So now came the bad ones.

"It does seem, however, that she is able to affect the properties of angelic power," Hierophant continued. "Be it directly or indirectly. Which property in particular was tinkered with I cannot say, as there are too many possibilities. Reduced potency, different parameters for harm, different *manners* of harm..."

He trailed off, shrugging, as he'd made his point. The specifics didn't actually matter all that much when it came down to it. Whatever the form it was a problem, to say the least, that if a metaphorical angelic arrow got shot the Bard could decide what *kind* of an arrow it became.

"Are you saying that the Intercessor has the ability to... reforge angels as she wills?" the First Prince said, sounding appalled.

"No," Masego said. "In a sense it is impossible to affect an angel directly – even those that are said to be 'dead' and have left behind a corpse remain in their Choir and unchanged. The Choirs are fixed entities. As befitting the way that she has been named an *intercessor*, I would theorize that what she affects are the 'senses' of angels. Not unlike coloured glass tinting one's perception of the world when that world itself remains objectively unchanged."

"So Mercy struck," I said. "But it didn't kill anyone, because simultaneously it saw that there was no one it should be killing."

"In essence," Hierophant agreed.

If the lever could be pulled down on that, though, it could also be pulled up. Which would be something of an issue if someone had, say, an angel corpse lying around that they'd unwisely made

a weapon out of, *Cordelia*. That wasn't a conversation that needed to be had in front of the Painted Knife and her fellows, though, so instead I asked if anyone still had questions for the band. The First Prince apparently shared my curiosity as to the fate of the dead fantassin, but we were both to be disappointed: it'd been the sorceries of the Barrow Lord that kept him moving and aware, so within a few days of the villains' destruction the corpse had begun breaking down. The aftermath of necromancy tended to be rough on bodies, from what I recalled. Made sense. You could only shove so much magic into even a living body before things started going south and corpses were even less flexible.

"He was given a marked grave in the way of the southern companies," the Grizzled Fantassin said, almost challengingly. "He kept his contract to the end, and deserves the long peace same as any of us."

It might have been possible to extract a few things out of the remains of the remains, in practice, but it honestly wasn't worth the effort considering it'd require either myself, Akua or one of few oldest Mighty in Cleves to see to that extraction in person. Being halfway decent people, the rest of the high table weren't inclined to argue in favour of graverobbing anyway. Hanno made plain to the three heroes that he'd want a more in-depth talk about their investigation at some point, and I casually informed my pair of the same, but aside from that we were done here. With the questions, anyway. They were released to rest and recreation, and within moments of the door closing we were dealing in state secrets.

"The crown of Callow has already made known its concerns regarding Procer's continued custody of the corpse of an angel," Vivienne said, leading the offensive. "After today, the dangers of continuing down that path should be even clearer."

Not what Hasenbach wanted to hear, I saw on her face – practiced a diplomat as she was, she'd spent too much time around me. Enough I'd learned some of her tricks, and that pleasant yet distant smile on her face tended to come out when she was feeling pressed.

"Secretary Corrales," the First Prince said, "if you would speak the appropriate part from the transcript of the Dead King's words at the end of the Salian conference?"

The tanned man sharply nodded. Idly I noted that Hasenbach had not said read and that the man was not looking at any papers. She was fond of precision, the First Prince.

"-and it will tell you, should you be clever enough, of the doom you all so narrowly escaped by the grace of Kairos Theodosian," the secretary quoted.

"Thank you," Cordelia smiled. "Now, should we take the Hidden Horror at his word then there seems to be different trouble here than the risks inherent to the Principate's possession of a large-scale defensive weapon."

Hasenbach wasn't a fool, much as her insistence to keep the corpse still angered me. It wasn't like I didn't understand the temptation of keeping the angelic weapon around. She'd only seriously consider using it if the Grand Alliance were already collapsing, anyhow, so from her perspective there really wasn't anything to lose in keeping it except some unease from my camp. It was a card up her sleeve in case the night got too dark for the dawn to pierce through, and unlike Named and coalition armies it was also something she had complete control over. No one would be pulling that trigger without her say-so, at least in theory. That had to be reassuring, considering that in practice Cordelia Hasenbach was sharing the reins over the war that would decide the survival of her nation with more people than any ruler would like.

My issue with this whole blunder had previously been that doomsday weapons were disaster magnets no one could ever really control – and were prone to backfiring massively – but with Zeze's words there was fresh unease to add to the brew. A weapon that answered to someone else first was best snapped over your knee.

"The Dead King implied that Kairos spared us something," I agreed, "which fits with the end of the Salian Peace. The angelic remains dredged up are allegedly from one of the Seraphim-"

"They are," Hanno flatly said. "You may take my word on it."

This might be a tad of a sensitive subject for the Sword of Judgement, I thought, but there weren't ways to tiptoe around it that I could see.

"I will," I agreeably replied. "So we've got a Seraphim corpse and a confirmation that the Intercessor can affect angels. The Tyrant of Helike then masterminds the Hierarch rising to... obstruct the Choir of Judgement, so to speak, and in the wake of that the Dead King speaks of us being spared doom by Kairos Theodosian's actions. The picture there is pretty clear, as far as I'm concerned."

If Cordelia had pulled the trigger on the Judgement corpse before Judgement got walled off by Bellerophon's maddest son, the Bard would have had a degree of control over what happened. Now, though, the corpse could have no tie to the Choir – even Hanno, its champion on Creation, could not get a peep out of them as far as I knew. If Masego was right and the Bard worked over angels by screwing with their 'senses', then the current state of the weapon was a dead end for her. She couldn't trick an inanimate

object, after all. The Tyrant of Helike had, true to form, solved an old headache by leaving us with a fresh one: right now, no one had any fucking idea what would actually happen if Cordelia pulled the trigger. Gods, but sometimes I wished I'd killed the little bastard myself. It'd at least give me something to look back to fondly when still dealing with the fallout of his actions *several years after his death*.

"By the Dead King's own admission, the danger has been averted," the First Prince noted.

"Are we now to take the word of the Hidden Horror for truth, Your Highness?" Roland politely asked. "Let us not pretend the creature will not serve its own interests above all."

"If the weapon is a threat to the Dead King, his interest is in discrediting it," the Kingfisher Prince pointed out. "Which he has not, strictly speaking, accomplished here."

In the sense that the Bard wouldn't currently be holding the reins, he had a point. On the other hand, Neshamah had neatly soured us on the Bard with this and further deepened my already deep objections to Hasenbach keeping that looming disaster of a weapon around. He'd gotten his gains, as he tended to.

"He hates the Intercessor like poison," I said. "Insofar as he's damaging her in our eyes, I'd tend to take him at his word. He's too canny of an old thing to try a lie there, there's too many Named in play for one of those to actually work for long."

The Intercessor herself would delight in revealing the inaccuracies, if only to further establish herself as the Dead King's ancient sworn enemy that we should all be listening to. After all, if the Hidden Horror was going out of his way to discredit her then she *must* be a threat. Truth be told, I did believe her to be that. Only to more than just Neshamah.

"Adanna," Hanno said, voice clear and calm. "If the remains of the Seraphim were used in a ritual and the Wandering Bard amplified the effects as much as she could, what sort of a scale would we be looking at?"

"I am uncertain," the Blessed Artificer reluctantly admitted. "Though as a rule, the greater the quantity of Light the simpler the purpose it can carry. At a greater than regional scale, harm is likely the sole effect that could reliably be had. I do not have the proper references to hazard a guess at the scale of propagation."

From the corner of my eye I saw Masego finishing a flourish of the wrist with a wooden stylus that's somehow written in dark letters over the tabletop. I leaned in closer, glancing at equations that were giving me a headache just to try to parse.

"Masego?" I asked.

He breathed out a little noise of triumph.

"The Whitecaps are the limiting factor," Hierophant called out. "Assuming there is a hard limit to the power a Choir can wield and the source would be in central Procer, we are looking at an estimated two thirds of Calernia being affected. Rhenia and parts of Hannover would be untouched, up north, while the eastern limit would be the Whitecaps down to the Stygian border with Delos. Assuming a dilution effect by large bodies of water-"

"At such a scale, there would not be," the Blessed Artificer told him. "A higher threshold of propagation, but that's all."

Masego let out a noise of grudging appreciation.

"In that case," he continued, "the city of Levante might be unaffected, and the mountainous parts of the Titanomachy would certainly be. Everything else would be within range."

"Ashur?" I faintly asked.

He shrugged.

"Fifty-fifty odds," he admitted. "The sea is an unpredictable boundary."

Utter silence followed in the aftermath of his words. Putting together the words of Masego and the Artificer, the picture painted was... horrifying, for lack of a stronger word. More than nine tenths of Procer and Levant dead, the better part of the Free Cities – including its two largest cities, Helike and Nicae – and *even odds* on the complete annihilation of the Thalassocracy. An end to the ratlings, and at the moment the Firstborn as well. Callow and Praes would get to hide behind the mountains and four of the Free Cities were far enough east to be spared, but the sheer loss of life... *Fuck*.

"It would end the armies of the Dead King as well," the Blessed Artificer quietly said. "And most likely destroy the Hellgate in Keter."

At the cost of what, two thirds of the population of Calernia? The Dominion wasn't densely populated, but Procer sure as Hells was and the Free *Cities* were aptly named. No wonder the Hidden Horror had believed everyone would turn on the Bard after learning this.

"Removing the hard limit in power, the Whitecaps will eventually be vaporized and we're looking at full saturation of the continent," Masego noted. "Including through the ground into the Kingdom Under, though that will take up to days longer."

"Even under your limited model the crater in central Procer is likely to touch dwarven tunnels," the Blessed Artificer condescendingly said, "and they'd be looking at the loss of a few principalities' worth of territory as well."

Ah, I thought with fixed smile on my face, would you look at that. They'd actually made it worse, which I'd doubted was possible. Now we also had to worry about the dwarves considering the weapon a threat and deciding to strike first.

"Merciless Gods, Hasenbach," I feelingly said. "How much more will it take to convince you to drop that fucking thing at the bottom of the Skiron Ocean?"

"The Kingdom of Callow has *grave* concerns about the keeping of such a potentially calamitous weapon," Vivienne said, translating my words into something more diplomatic.

"Much of what was said here is speculation," the First Prince mildly replied. "And even this speculation points to the risk having passed."

"If a proper method to wield the remains is created, it is the sort of weapon that could win us this war," the Blessed Artificer agreed.

"Or it could kill us all," the Rogue Sorcerer gently reminded her.

"You have personally patronized the Quartered Seasons weapon, Queen Catherine," Cordelia reminded me. "Which carries great risks as well, to my recollection."

"I've limited information on it, but it's ultimately a Grand Alliance initiative and not a purely Callowan one," I replied. "I've been preparing the results for perusal, as a matter of fact, now that tangible progress has been made. I can't say the same about that corpse you're dragging around."

"Then your issue is the lack of Callowan observers, not the weapon itself," the First Prince said.

My brow rose. This kind of wordplay might be useful in a place like the Highest Assembly, where appearances were everything and such little victories counted, but she ought to know better than to try to finagle me. I was in no way above using a bloody hatchet where a stiletto failed to get the point across.

"No," I bluntly said. "My issue is with anyone's possession of a weapon that could potentially wipe out two thirds of Calernia. There's no equivalence to be drawn there, First Prince. If Quartered Seasons goes wrong it'll be a disaster, but a *survivable* one. Your 'large-scale defensive weapon' is a blade

put to the throat of millions, and I did not torch such a weapon in Praesi hands only to meekly accept your keeping the same."

A bit of an exaggeration there, since Black had been the one to destroy Liesse while I'd actually been inclined to side with Malicia in the heat of the moment, but it wasn't like anyone else here *knew* that. Blue eyes stayed on me as Hasenbach attempted to gauge how serious I was being, and I hid nothing: this was genuinely unacceptable. It'd been a liability before, but now it was something a lot worse.

"We have gone far beyond the remit of this council," the First Prince eventually said. "If there are grievances to be had, there are mechanisms to address them under the treaties binding the Grand Alliance."

My eyes narrowed. The diplomatic thing here would have been implying it was up for negotiation before brushing me off, opening the path for later private talks if she wasn't willing to hash this out in the open here. The First Prince had *not* done that. She was sending the message there wasn't room for compromise there, and coming from a diplomat of her calibre that surprised me. What was driving her to keep her finger on that trigger at all costs? I glanced at the White Knight and found him looking remote, almost absent-minded. Whether it was because Judgement had been spoken of or because he saw the disputes of crown as beyond him, I could not be certain. Either way it was less than helpful.

"It might allay some unease if specialists were allowed to take a look at this weapon and ascertain its possible effects," Vivienne suggested.

A fair suggestion, I thought, but not a tempting one for Procer. In our case said specialist would be Masego, which I somehow doubted they would go for. They weren't idiots, they had to know that letting the Hierophant riffle through anything miraculous was as good as allowing him to shut it down at will.

"Something to discuss under different circumstances, Lady Dartwick," the First Prince politely replied.

Huh. Really not giving even the shadow of an inch, was she?

"White Knight?" I tried.

If he wasn't going to step in by himself, I'd drag him into the melee by the scruff of the neck.

"It would be unwise to further debate this without having sought more information," Hanno eventually said. "This council has served its purpose, I believe, and need not be further prolonged."

I hid my displeasure. Not what I'd wanted to hear, though I supposed it was much like him to keep silent until he'd dug through enough memories he had a better idea of what he was dealing with. The White Knight disliked rushing to decision when there were still cards yet to be revealed. Though he didn't show it, I suspected he was a lot warier of making mistakes now that the Seraphim were no longer looking over his shoulder. With both Hasenbach and Hanno supporting this all coming to an end there was little point in pursuing the opposite, so I folded and we called the meeting to an end. The First Prince caught my eye as we began to disperse, however, and her secretary passed along an invitation to walk with her a span. Before long we were sharing a stretch of hallway between my limp and her measured stride, Vivienne and the Kingfisher Prince trailing behind us.

"I have concerns," the First Prince told me with unusual forthrightness.

For her to drop the more elegant methods she preferred, they had to be some pretty dire fucking concerns.

"You've heard mine," I said, frowning. "I'm all ears for yours."

"The Truce and Terms are proving to be highly unstable," Cordelia Hasenbach said. "An uncomfortable number of collaborators were found by the Intercessor among both Chosen and Damned, and now the White Knight himself was mutilated by one of his subordinates. I am forced to wonder if these trials are not simply the act of gilding a sinking boat."

Fuck, I thought. All this time I'd been worried about keeping my villains in line and Hanno's lot from stepping on mine, but I'd not stopped to think about how the Principate would see it all. Hasenbach was still being asked to ignore attempted regicide of one of her princes so that the authority of increasingly bloodied Terms might be preserved. The more their credibility was damaged by little things like the Mirror Knight cutting up a high officer of the Grand Alliance, the less she'd be inclined to bend her neck. I studied her from the corner of my eye. Given how useful Named still were to the fronts, she was exaggerating to some extent there. Even if the Terms had been much worse, from a pragmatic perspective they'd still be a net advantage when it came to survival – and that was the way Hasenbach had to think, right now. She was drawing my attention to this to make a point elsewhere.

Considering what we'd just finished having a council about, it was not hard to guess.

"There are some matters that can be gambled with," I slowly said. "There are others where the simple act of implying a gaming mood loses trust in a way that cannot be mended."

I would not haggle over the custody of the doomsday corpse, not when it'd been made clear that there might be millions of lives hanging in the balance.

"I will not allow policy to be dictated by pissing matches among Named, Queen Catherine," Cordelia Hasenbach coolly said.

It was the crudest thing I'd ever heard come out of her mouth, and that was enough to give me pause.

"The coming trials will clarify whether Chosen and Damned can be trusted to oversee themselves," the First Prince of Procer warned. "And if your kind proves to be running wild unchecked, Black Queen, if they cannot be counted on?"

She met my eyes.

"Then the Principate will do what it must to survive, no matter whose feathers it ruffles. On that point there can be no negotiation."

Chapter 37: Trying

"A man should beware of praying for justice when he truly wants vindication. He might just get what he asked for, and it is never a pretty thing when we all get exactly what we deserve."
– King Pater of Callow, the Unheeding

There were too many parts in motion for me to keep track of them all, and I did not like the feeling in the slightest.

Late in the night Lord Yannu Marave arrived in the Arsenal, though given the hour I elected not to reach out to him until morning. Now that the representative for the Dominion was there, the right amount of high officer for the Grand Alliance had gathered and the trials could begin. A round of messengers sent to all involved saw me get answers as I broke my fast with Vivienne just before Morning Bell, the two of us catching up over warm pastries by Hakram's bedside. The necessary official talk we'd gotten out of the way the day before, at least when it came to getting me up to speed about all she'd been up to, so we'd allowed ourselves the luxury of an hour or two for ourselves. It ended up being less than that, inevitably, as the last messages came while she was on the tail end of a rant about living so close to the seat of Proceran power.

"If I receive another subtle yet suggestive poem from a secret admirer, I'm going to start setting the Jacks after them," Vivienne told me, at least halfway seriously. "I'm actually pretty sure two of them actually hired the same poet to write for them because the rhymes were *suspiciously* similar."

I answered with an amused snort.

"Any fish work hooking in there?" I teased.

"Please," she dismissed. "Like taking a Proceran to bed wouldn't be horrible politics even if those trying their hands weren't either ambitious fools or spies."

"Terrible politics," I agreed, without the faintest hint of irony.

I'd been taught by some very fine liars, after all. And it had truly been that to dally with Frederic, admittedly. Terrible, delightful politics that did that delicious thing with their hips. I seemed to have gotten away with it, though, so I'd not get greedy and ruin it by dallying again even if the thought was occasionally tempting. A knock at the door was followed by another messenger being allowed in, passing along a written response. Hanno had been the last to answer, not by lack of punctuality but by being the hardest to find. His agreement to the first trial – the Hunted Magician's – being held half past Noon Bell was dropped by Cordelia's impressively prompt one and the Lord of Malaga's slightly slower answer.

"So?" Vivienne asked. "Are we starting today?"

"This afternoon," I replied. "All agreed."

In the wake of wrapping this up, I'd spring on them the Concocter's own punishment. None of this was supporting Hasenbach outright, but prompt and severe consequences for my Named who'd stepped out of line ought to make it clear the reins were still being held. As long as the trials for Above's didn't end up spoiling the brew, anyway. The Mirror Knight had not tried to escape imprisonment and the Severance was back under seal, but my polite inquiries had made it clear that Hanno did not see a trial as something to discuss in advance. I'd expected as much, honestly, given that I was dealing with the Sword of Judgement. I still didn't like that I'd be going in blind there, but there wasn't really anything I could do there – under the Terms this was the White Knight's show, and no trespass of mine there would go without swift and severe answer.

"Yannu Marave's considered a pragmatist by his countrymen," my dark-haired heiress said. "Not aggressive by nature, though he'll be extremely thorough in answering slights. So long as you don't end up touching the Dominion's bottom line, though, I don't see him being trouble."

Hasenbach had intimated as much, but it was good to hear the same talk coming from a source I could trust wholeheartedly.

"The crowns do matter," I admitted, "but it's the White Knight that'll be the keystone."

The Terms were, ultimately, a treaty between Named. The nations that'd signed on did so mostly as guarantors of rights and privileges, not legal authorities – Procer, Callow and Levant all had a seat in the tribunals but in the end it was the White Knight and the Black Queen that passed sentences. It'd have a lot more of an impact if Hanno had issues with my rulings than if nation did.

"True as that is," Vivienne calmly said, "what is left to do now, save pulling the trigger?"

I'd never won much arguing with the truth, so I let the conversation end on that.

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Putting the staff together for this hadn't been all that difficult, since the members of the Arsenal could serve as a 'neutral' entity to draw people from. Not the Named, of course, but the scholars and mages and priests. I'd decided to avoid any trouble by drawing on scholars for the scribing work, and from Vivienne's own staff for the rest. The ever-useful Lady Henrietta Morley – these days no mere landless aristocrat but instead Viv's own private secretary – was recommended to me as someone capable of handling details and timing, so I put her in charge of handling transcripts and evidence.

For all that this was a formal trial under the Terms, it appeared somewhat haphazard at first glance. At the high table the tribunal sat, with Vivienne representing Callow and the rest as expected: Cordelia Hasenbach for Procer, Yannu Marave for Levant and Hanno for the heroes. They'd all been provided with a list of the accusations laid at the Hunted Magician's feet earlier today, which weren't actually all that numerous. 'Aid to an enemy of the Grand Alliance' on one count, for having cooperated with the Bard against the Arsenal, then one count of 'unprovoked assault on allies' for the gas canisters he'd opened in the Stacks and one count of 'accessory to attempted murder' for the illusions he'd woven when attempting to help the Red Axe get Frederic killed.

I'd spoken with the Concocter, who would have had a right to lodge a complain considering the gas in those canisters had been her work in the first place, but she'd declined to pursue the matter. Through me, anyway. No doubt she'd be making a deal of her own with the Magician without my being involved. Of those charges the 'aid to an enemy' was the most severe, the deceptively mild wording mostly a result of it not being possible to call it treason when there were so many different crowns and jurisdictions involved. It was still considered just as severe,

though, and it'd be the driving force behind the harshest part of his sentence.

The Hunted Magician had come dressed soberly but smartly, having put on an embroidered pale green vest over a white long-sleeved shirt and loose dark trousers. Like most the times I'd seen him, he looked more like a wealthy nobleman in casual clothes than any sort of mage. It was all well-cut without being ostentatious, which was halfway clever of him: it was a shallow thing, but people tended to favour those who looked well. Look too rich, though, and pretty or not that appreciation tended to turn to antipathy with some. He'd straddled the line well, which only had me further convinced that he was highborn and not from a lesser line. In Procer in particular, the difference between those who dressed well but subtly and those who were garish with their wealth was one of the ways to tell apart those whose 'nobility' was an old thing, often preceding the Principate itself, from those who'd risen to higher station more recently by sword or coin.

I'd already been on my feet when the Hunted Magician had been escorted in, made to stand on bare stone as behind a set of wards and guards the assembled high officers of the Grand Alliance sat and watched him approach, so I only needed to limp a bit before I stood by his side. The man turned dark eyes on me, face blank, and I leaned in a little closer.

"Keep your head," I murmured. "They're not out to get you but no one here wants you to wiggle out either, least of all me, so take your lumps and walk away."

"I helped your man," the Magician murmured back. "Do not forget it."

"I forget little, Hunted Magician," I coldly replied. "And never aid given to my enemies. Best you don't forget that either, yes?"

He'd been well-taught enough not to grimace at the reminder that even the help he'd given Masego when it came to Quartered Seasons hardly made up for the hand he'd had in the storm that'd swept over the Arsenal. A great deal could have been mitigated, if he'd not decided it would be the height of cleverness to make a deal with the Wandering Bard. Mind you, if Tariq hadn't insisted we hedge our bets when it came to her such a deal might have smelled of the noose enough the Magician wouldn't have dared. Past a certain point, fault became such a many-faceted thing there was little practical point in pondering it. I turned away from my charged and faced the tribunal. Cordelia was unreadable, Hanno lightly frowning and Yannu Marave looked already bored. Vivienne, clever thing that she was, was spending more time looking at the other members of the tribunal than anything else.

"I'll not trouble you with an excess off ceremony," I said.
"You've all already been made aware of the breaches of the Terms the Hunted Magician has been accused of. For the sake of formality, I will list them once more: aid to an enemy of the Grand Alliance, unprovoked assault on allies and accessory to attempted murder. As representative for the villains under the Terms, these are the charges I will lay against him. Do any of you intend to present further charges, or contest those I have laid down?"

"I do not," the First Prince calmly said.

"No," the Lord of Alava bluntly said.

Vivienne silently shook her head, but like me her eyes were on the White Knight.

"Yes," the White Knight said.

My fingers clenched around the length of dead yew in my hand.

"Elaborate, White Knight," I said.

"Your charge of 'accessory to attempted murder' would attaint the Red Axe of said attempted murder before she's stood trial of her own," Hanno said.

Which was, I grimly though, actually a good point. Sure any idiot could tell I was right to call it that – there wasn't a lot of room for interpretation in the act of hacking a sword at Frederic's neck – but the Terms functioned because I passed judgement for villains and Hanno for the heroes. Neither of us could or should trespass beyond that boundary.

"I'll not withdraw the charge," I said, "but I would offer assurances that I would not consider the Red Axe in away attainted by it."

"Callow agrees with such a compromise," Vivienne calmly said.

It was a cheap trick, agreeing with me quickly to put the pressure on others, but that didn't mean it wouldn't be effective.

"Levant agrees as well," Lord Yannu dismissed.

Cordelia's cool blue eyes were slightest bit narrowed in thought, but she did not hesitate as soon as she was satisfied she'd parsed out the implications.

"The Principate is in agreement," she flatly stated.

Eyes went to Hanno, whose frown has deepened ever so slightly.

"I am wary of influencing opinion in another trial even with such a compromise," the White Knight said. "Yet I can recognize that opinion is not bound to be settled by law, and so it should not be objected to on such grounds. Under such an assurance, I withdraw my objection."

Well, first hurdle passed. From there, it was mostly a matter of presenting to the tribunal what I was making my own judgement on. By Henrietta Morley's practiced hand my witnesses were brought in one after the other, those made to present in person at least. Unprovoked assault was the easiest to prove, so I started with that: two scholars who'd been made unconscious by the gas, a healer to certify none of those affected had any lasting consequences – which would have made it more than mere unprovoked assault – and the Magician confessed to the theft of the canisters and their use when pressed.

"If the canisters were stolen, why is theft not being laid as a charge?" the First Prince asked. "I believe those were property of the Principate, as well."

The Concocter had made those as a possible tool for Cordelia to quell riots bloodlessly, apparently, and created them using Proceran coin. But I'd known about this in advance and prepared for it.

"The canisters remained the Concocter's property so long as they were in the Arsenal, and she's declined to lodge any grievances," I said. "Lady Morley?"

The noblewoman had a signed statement by said Concocter backing up my words brought forward, and after it was made clear that the loss of the canisters and their content would be folded into the repair budget for the Arsenal after the raid instead of forcing Procer to pay for the same goods twice she had no further objection. We moved on to the slightly trickier one, accessory to attempted murder. Two officers – one Levantine and one Callowan – were brought to describe the illusion woven, which had been of the Prince of Brus acting and speaking aggressively. Marave spoke up for the first time, just to make sure his countrymen would face no retribution for baring steel on a prince of the blood, and lost interest as soon as he was reassured this was the case.

My case for this was weaker, and in truth some would have folded it into 'aid to an enemy of the Grand Alliance', but I was actually doing the Magician a favour here. By making him part of someone else's attempted murder, in this case the Red Axe's, I was preventing him from being accused of having tried the same thing only on the Bard's behalf. Trying to get a prince of the blood – and hero – killed for the Intercessor would warrant steep consequences, while helping a heroine in her own fumbled attempt was not quite so grave. He wasn't a fool, and he obviously knew the Terms in and out, it was almost eagerly that the Hunted

Magician confessed to an act I had only moderate proof of him having carried out. After Yannu Marave watching out for his fellow Levantines I got no interruption, and we swiftly went on to the last of the charges.

"First, I want to remind you that even at this very moment the Wandering Bard has yet to be designated an enemy of the Grand Alliance," I said. "It was not a breach of the Terms to have dealings with her when the Hunted Magician did. What was a breach, however, was how information like the location and inner dealings of the Arsenal – a secret location – were revealed to an outsider. It was when the Bard then masterminded an assault here that the Magician's actions became 'aid to an enemy'. In this light, it seems appropriate to water my wine."

"Traitors should only know one kind of mercy," Yannu Marave replied.

Most people in the room knew enough about the Dominion that he didn't have to slide a finger across his throat to actually spell out what he meant. That he didn't bother to do it anyway made him a fairly subtle man, by Levantine standards.

"It is not appropriate to speak of the sentencing before the trial is finished," the White Knight cut in, tone even. "Is there a reason for it, Black Queen?"

"Informing deliberation is part of her responsibilities as representative for Below's champions," Vivienne coolly replied. "Failing in *that* duty would truly be inappropriate, unlike what you're currently fretting about."

The Lord of Alava let out a chuckle, looking more interested than he'd been in the better part of an hour.

"Fighting words," he approvingly said.

I cleared my throat.

"I spoke to this to make clear that I believe the Hunted Magician's breach of the Terms was done not out of malice but out of ignorance and incompetence," I said.

The man stiffened behind me but had enough sense not to argue my words.

"Indeed?" the First Prince of Procer said, eyebrow quirking.

I suspected that, after the last few weeks, Cordelia was rather enjoying watching one of we troublesome Named squirm in discomfort.

"Absolutely," I told her. "The Magician's fault came as a result of wildly overestimating himself, when in fact his arrogance and

simplicity allowed a genuinely malicious entity to make use of him as a tool."

The Magician twitched at my words but kept his mouth shut. Maybe he wasn't entirely beyond salvaging, then. Evidence over his conspiracy with the Bard was sparse as wheat fields in the Hungering Sands, but that was seen to by the simple magic of having told him in advance that if he took his fucking lumps and confessed I wouldn't need to treat him as a liability. Through gritted teeth, the Proceran confessed to having had dealings with the Bard. He left out as much as he could, as I'd expected, but even the bare bones were damning enough. His saving grace here would be that he hadn't actually killed anyone here directly, which hadn't actually been all that difficult to prove: all our dead and wounded were accounted for, the reasons for their state more or less clear. His responsibility there was indirect, which left me some wiggling room even with the gravity of the aid charge.

I'd finished making my case, so without further ado I asked the tribunal if they wanted to deliberate before recommendations were made to me. Hanno did, but no one else was in favour so he conceded and we went on straight to the tribunal offering its recommendations.

"I trust in the judgement of the Black Queen," Cordelia said, opening the game with a measured smile, "and I expect that her sentencing will be fitting."

Easier to say, I supposed, when you already knew what that sentence was. Still, she'd left herself some room to manoeuvre just in case what I'd told her I'd pass as a sentence wasn't what I'd actually say now.

"We should be fitting his head for a pike," Lord Yannu said. "But if he's just an idiot, as you say, it'd be a waste. Levant will settle for flesh instead of a skull, Black Queen."

I nodded. Not exactly a push for moderation, that, but it was signaling that the Dominion would be satisfied so long as the punishment stung. The details of that punishment, though, they hardly cared about. Vivienne did not speak, since it would have been quite the empty game if she'd pretended she had the right to speak with Callow over me, so it was Hanno that spoke next – but only after a long silence spent carefully choosing his words.

"There must be visible consequence to aiding a common enemy," the White Knight eventually said. "And given that the breaches seems to have been committed on personal grounds, the consequences should be personal as well."

Mhm. He'd been careful not to actually suggest a sentence – knowing that whether I then followed his suggestion or ignored it

there'd still be trouble from some quarters – but it was clear he wanted a few metaphorical fingers broken. Nothing permanent, I meant, but at the very least lasting pain. The tribunal would have the right to comment once more once I'd offered the 'draft' of my sentence, and I suspected he was keeping his comments limited until we got there. Nothing I'd heard now went against what I'd planned, so it was a simple thing from there: I simply shared the sentence I'd already told Hasenbach I planned to hand down. Loss of the right to refuse assignments, then a fine equivalent to the sum of the damages done to the Arsenal repeated for every signatory member. Pensions for the families of the dead got a grunt of approval from Lord Marave, but otherwise he seemed skeptical of the punishment until I specified the fine could be repaid in work.

The prospect of Levant having access to a highly-skilled Named enchanter brightened his eyes, especially considering that with the established debt there wouldn't be a need to pay that enchanter.

The Hunted Magician himself looked appalled, at first, but as the initial surprise passed he looked thoughtful. He'd figured out the advantages for him, then – ties to three crowns, and good reason for each to ensure he stayed alive after the Truce and Terms ended and the Accords replaced them. Satisfied he wouldn't be a stick in my wheel going forward, I returned my attention to the tribunal. The First Prince, content I had kept to my word, gave her seal of approval promptly. The Lord of Alava was not far behind, and mostly symbolically Vivienne agreed for Callow. The last to speak was once more Hanno, and he was studying the Hunted Magician closely.

"It is a measured punishment," the White Knight said, "but it lacks consequence."

My brow rose. I'd been pretty severe already, so I wasn't exactly inclined to bite there.

"Coin is coin," Hanno said. "But such a failing should not be kept under wraps. Let his breaches be made known to all Named. Let sunlight burn out the rot, so that something wiser might replace it."

Mhm. Well, it'd be a humiliation for the Magician but it wasn't like the specifics of the assault on the Arsenal were going to stay secret forever. He couldn't lose respect the heroes already didn't give him, and my own lot would be more inclined to mock a failed plot that condemn it on moral grounds. I could actually kind of see what Hanno was going for, there: if the Named under the Terms became a community, then reputation would start being worth a lot more more. It'd become something worth taking small losses to preserve, if it was actually useful, and serve as an

incentive to keep one's word. It was worth encouraging, and not unreasonable to ask.

"Agreed," I said. "The breaches and sentence will be made known to all Named under the Terms, if not the details of the trial."

He nodded in thanks, and another round of consultations got me the unanimous seal of approval from the tribunal that I did not need but had definitely wanted. This had, to my surprise, actually gone pretty well. The Concocter's own punishment wouldn't require a trial like this, but I'd wait until later to make it known to the high officers seated in the room – there was no need to muddle the waters by doing too much at once. A semi-formal occasion sometime this week would do just as well, with an opportunity to voice issues should there be any. This wasn't like hitting a tavern with friends, so when the business was done we all parted ways after the proper courtesies were offered. I'd intended on thanking the staff I'd borrowed personally, including Vivienne's own, but the White Knight lingered long enough to catch my eye so I passed that duty along to Vivs and accepted the implied invitation to go on a walk.

Considering Hanno had made it clear he wasn't going to be discussing the trials in advance, I was pretty curious about what it was he actually wanted. I was doing a lot of limping in hallways with important people these days, I mused, to discuss all sorts of concerns. I was going to have to see about getting some of this done seated, or else I'd need to arrange for more of the brew that made my leg sufferable without drawing on Night.

"Your leg is paining you," Hanno said, eyes narrowing as he studied me.

Not the start I'd expected, but true enough.

"That's what legs do," I dismissed.

"I will refrain from small talk," the White Knight told me. "We can slow, if you prefer."

"Thought you said we wouldn't be doing small talk," I grunted back.

I'd never learned to take pity all that well, even when it was kindly meant, and I was starting to feel too old to try. The dark-skinned hero didn't even blink at my bite. I supposed he was used to it, by now.

"The First Prince has approached me several times now," Hanno said. "She has several intentions, but foremost among them is securing agreement for the Red Axe being tried under Proceran law instead of the Terms."

I didn't bother to fake surprise. Even odds he'd be able to tell even if I did, and we were largely on the same side besides.

"I've heard the speech as well," I said, then after mulling it over threw him a bone, "from both her and the Kingfisher Prince."

The White Knight did not look all that surprised, but he nodded in thanks anyway. Yeah, I wasn't surprised that the First Prince hadn't tried to win him over through Frederic. The Kingfisher Prince was his subordinate, in a sense, and it would have tripped a lot of those Proceran unspoken law to bring attention so clumsily to the divided loyalties of Prince Frederic of Brus.

"I would not impugn your character," Hanno delicately said, "yet I imagine a diplomat of Cordelia Hasenbach's skill would have not prepared an offer easy to refuse."

I decided to be amused instead of insulted, after a beat. He was asking whether or not I'd been bought by whatever it was Hasenbach had offered me for my agreement, in this case Procer's seal of approval on the Liesse Accords as they currently stood. Hanno had been right in both suspecting an offer would be made to me and that it'd be a very tempting one, so I'd forgive him on account of that and the delicacy of inquiry.

"I didn't bite," I bluntly told him. "My priorities haven't shifted, White Knight. First is winning this war, second is establishing the Liesse Accords. Most everything else is noise."

Not entirely true, since my neck would bend some when it came to the preservation of Callow, but in essence I stood by my words. I'd rather fight this war in Procer now, even if it got ruinous to my kingdom's treasury, than on Callowan borders in a decade with fewer allies and resources to call on. It wasn't going to make me popular, but I could live with that: there was a reason my abdication was set in stone.

"I believed this would be the case," Hanno admitted, "but I had to ask. The intensity of Procer's overtures over this worries me. It smells of desperation, and despair makes for a poor councillor."

"She has reason to be worried," I admitted. "We both had traitors, White. If it'd been only my lot she might have been able to write it off as Below's usual perfidy, but yours have arguably been making more trouble with her. Add to that the three fingers calling the Mirror Knight to heel cost you, and it doesn't paint a pretty picture. We're not looking all that reliable."

And, in an ironic twist, for once it was the *heroes* who were looking like the problem child. Between killing villains, bleeding princes and dabbling in coups, it had to be said that

Above's champions had not come out of the last month looking pristine. My lot looked better in comparison, amusingly enough, but much as it pained me to admit it that might not necessarily be a good thing. Villains weren't the ones bringing the trust to the table, when it came to nations backing the Terms. A risk had been taking on Below's folk in large part because I was riding herd of them and I'd shown a lot of goodwill to the leaders of Levant and Procer. That and I'd established early on that I was perfectly willing to kill villains if they stepped out of line. In the end, though, it was the heroes that brought trustworthiness to the Truce and Terms. It was their reputations, their record, that justified all the twists and turns and compromises that were being had to keep Named mustered and pointed at Keter.

If they were no longer trusted, we had a problem.

"I have worries myself," Hanno frankly replied. "Most urgent among them the First Prince keeping the remains of one of the Seraphim. Even were she not attempting to make some sort of sordid weapon out of it, I would be troubled: such a thing is *not* to be trifled with."

I grimaced. Glad as I was that the White Knight shared my misgivings there, there were risks to making common front. We were already refusing Hasenbach over the Red Axe, and then we'd be trying to pry what she probably saw as her weapon of last resort from her hands. I was pretty sure Levant could be convinced to back us over this, through Tariq if nothing else, but I was wary of going through with this. Like Hanno had said, Procer was starting to smell of desperation. I'd heard in Frederic's voice and seen it on Hasenbach's face, so I was wary of pushing the Principate when it already felt cornered.

People did *stupid* things, when they felt cornered.

The hardest lesson I'd learned since putting on the fancy hat and eating a season had been that just because you could win a fight didn't mean you should be fighting it. There was already too much fighting going on among people who should all be on the same side, and it was like the assault on the Arsenal had shone down a light on every fracture that lay at the heart of the Grand Alliance. They were growing bigger, I could feel it, and yet caution was stilling my hand: a hasty move, now, could do untold damage. *And yet waiting too long will do just the same*, I thought. We needed to finish those trials as soon as possible, then tie up Mercantis and the Gigantes. Gods, all this trouble and we'd yet to even begin the godsdamned war council for the actual fucking war we were fighting.

"Give her time," I said. "She's a pragmatic creature, there's only so many bridges she'll be willing to burn over this."

"It will have to be addressed before our time at the Arsenal ends," Hanno said.

"Agreed," I reluctantly said, then cast him a dark look. "And you need to get your house in order, quick, before we lost more trust. I doubt Procer will try to outright axe the Terms, but there's lesser measures it can take. They could restrict access to cities, assign escorts – Hells they could just begin funding Named on their good side and *only* them. This isn't a flip of the coin, White Knight, they have more than two options."

Poor choice of words there, I realized a heartbeat later with a wince, but he did not comment on it.

"Then the Mirror Knight can stand trial tomorrow," Hanno offered instead.

"Good," I nodded. "Once that's out of the way, we can sit down with the First Prince and find a way to settle the trouble over the Red Axe."

"I will not discuss sentencing, Black Queen," the dark-eyed man flatly said. "I have already told you this."

Gods save me from heroes, all prickly as cats and half as sensible.

"Then don't," I sharply said. "Talk about how we arrange this so she doesn't have to deal with a revolt in the Highest Assembly, something that we *cannot afford*. I'm not great admirer of her princes, White, but your girl cut a prince of the blood that was trying to protect her from harm. They're right to be on pins and needles about it: nobody wants a young Regicide walking around, only this one protected by treaty. I won't argue to throw her to the wolves, we have to clean our own houses, but we have to give them *something*."

The White Knight considered me for a long moment.

"I do not see what we can, Black," he finally said.

"Then pray, hero," I said, baring my teeth. "And I'll see what I can get done down in the mud."

Chapter 38: Tantamount

"A diplomat without a general at his back is just a polite man no one heeds."

– Exarch Acantha of Penthes

Within an hour I received a formal message asking for my agreement to hold the Mirror Knight's trial tomorrow. I sent back said agreement immediately and I must not have been the only one

to be prompt, as within an hour of *that* the White Knight sent along the formal charges that Christophe de Pavanie would be accused of. I narrowed my eyes at the paucity of them: assault of an ally and insubordination. That was it. No mention of the fact that he'd kept the Severance at his hip long after the crisis had passed, though Hanno might make the case that since no formal demand to return it had been made of the Mirror Knight it hadn't actually been a breach of the Terms for him to keep it. It wasn't even *unprovoked* assault of an ally, I noted with distaste, but instead a lesser sister-charge.

I'd reserve judgement – no pun intended, Sisters preserve – until the trial took place, but I wouldn't consider this an auspicious beginning.

Intriguingly enough, I got a third message in the wake of the first two and not from someone I'd expected to be reaching out. After I'd sat down with Vivienne to go over the possible outcomes of tomorrow with a cup of wine in hand, our talk was interrupted by a message from Lord Yannu Marave. He was overseeing the sparring of his sworn swords in the Revel's arena, and he'd invited me to come have a look. It was a threadbare excuse to have a private talk, but that he might want that talk at all surprised me. I shared the thought with Vivienne.

"They call him Careful Yannu, back home," she mused.

My brow rose.

"He did not strike me as all that careful a man, during the trial," I said. "Juniper has some respect for his skill as a general and I'll not argue there, but he's not particularly impressed me otherwise."

"The Dominion doesn't do politics like we do, Cat," Vivienne reminded me. "They often duel, when they disagree, and they're cautious with risking their honour. He didn't particularly care about the trial because by Levantine ways he shouldn't have been in the room – villains are yours to discipline, as your 'sworn men'."

My forehead creased in thought as I considered him again with fresh eyes. He'd spoken in favour of death, when the time came for recommendations, but to Levantines things like betrayals tended to be seen as matters of honour. Honour was usually settled by blood on the floor, back in Levant, so for a lord of the Dominion to express surprise this didn't start and end with putting the Magician's head on a pike made a brutal sort of sense.

"Careful Yannu, huh," I murmured.

I wasn't entirely convinced, but best to watch my step anyway. There were damned few situations where it wouldn't be a good idea to do that, so what was there to lose?

"There's an emerging pattern of the Dominion reaching out to us amicably," Vivienne thoughtfully continued. "When they suggested we arrange formal ambassadors I thought it might be leftover goodwill from your saving the Pilgrim, or perhaps courting your support in keeping their villains from making trouble, but now I'm not so sure."

"They've been wary of making deals with me," I slowly said, "but at the highest rungs of Dominion leadership they'll be aware of my eventual abdication. You're a lot more palatable, from their perspective."

A former heroine with some impressive deeds to her name, nobly born but not afraid to get her hands a little dirty? That sort of reputation would go over very well, down in Levant.

"They also remember how quickly Proceran gratitude fades," Vivienne murmured. "And how a First Prince can withdraw from the treaties signed by a predecessor. A treaty of mutual defence between our realms might appeal to their Majilis."

"I'd think it more likely they want an informal alignment within the bounds of the Grand Alliance," I told her. "They don't want it to become a vessel for Proceran interests any more than we do."

"They'll be in no hurry to seal a pact, regardless," Vivienne noted. "Bargaining done with an ally is expected to be gentler, and the negotiations over the Accords is the greatest leverage the Dominion has over us at the moment."

True enough. More than once I'd wondered if Procer and Levant were actually drawing those talks out so that they could bribe me with 'concessions' when they wanted something from me. Not a pleasant thought to entertain, but even if it turned out to be true there honestly wasn't much I could do about it.

"No reason not to take up Lord Marave on his invitation, then," I said, draining the rest of my cup before rising to my feet.

No reason to waste time, either, so I got to it.

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I wasn't one to complain when offered up the sight of two dozen very fit men and women half-naked and laying hands on each other, but it lost some of the charm when they were doing their best to pummel each other unconscious. I'd been in a few brawls myself, back in the day, so I could tell that no one was taking it easy

down there: those blows weren't being pulled in the slightest. If the personal sworn swords of Yannu of the Champion's Blood had been 'sparring' with blades instead of fists, there'd be corpses on the sand by now. As it was, I saw only blood and broken bones. A pair of young Levantine healers – who amusingly enough wouldn't be considered real priests in the Dominion even though they used Light, as unlike the Lanterns they did not battle against evil – mended the fighters during their breaks, but did not otherwise involve themselves.

Yannu Marave himself sat besides me on the rafters, drinking deeply from a waterskin. He'd been down there fighting with the others when I got there, and only come up after one of the healers set a broken finger and bathed it in Light. The Lord of Alava was still barefoot and clad in only loose trousers and a sweat-soaked tunic, neither of which hid the fact that the man was a towering slab of muscle. He was tall, for a Levantine, and unusually for one of their men close-shaven instead of bearded. His colours were not currently on his face, but instead discreetly painted in intertwined threads around his wrist. After emptying what must have been half the skin, the Lord of Alava sighed in pleasure.

"I thank you for your patience," Lord Yannu said.

"I didn't send a messenger ahead to warn of my coming," I dismissed with a shrug.

There'd been others up here when I first came, who'd invited me to take a seat on the bench where I still was, but they'd withdrawn when their lord came up. Now he glanced back at them meaningfully and they reached within the leather bags at their side, fiddling with something within. A moment later the small tingle of a ward coming down over the area passed over my skin, and I eyed the men speculatively. They wore armour, both of them, which was rare in mages aside from those in my army and the Legions – and even there it was a lighter kit than that of the regulars. They might not be mages at all, though, or just practitioners with a meagre Gift: it did not take much to wake the wardstones the Blood used. Gifts from the Gigantes, they were a wonder to behold and one I remained deeply envious of.

"Hiding stones," the Lord of Alava said, noting my interest. "We will not be heard, not even by the men carrying them."

"Useful," I said.

Hopefully it wasn't too obvious on my face that I'd trade the Blessed Isle for a reliable way to get those. Not that I currently owned the Blessed Isle, but that'd never stopped me before.

"I will not waste our time with small talk," Lord Yannu said. "We both know what this is."

I hummed, inclining my head in unspoken agreement.

"We're not happy with Procer having an *ealamal*," the tall man said.

"I'm not familiar with the term," I said, "but I can guess what you're referring to."

"The angel-corpse, you have called it," Lord Yannu said. "That is the word for such a thing in Murcadan."

Ealamal, huh. It had a ring to it. Less ungainly to keep mentioning, too.

"Understood," I said. "I'm not happy about it either, as you already know."

"I do," he said. "And the heads of two lines of the Blood vouch that your word has weight, so now we speak. Procer is a great but dying beast, and I do not advise forcing its lair, yet for that same reason we must act. An animal bleeding out cannot be trusted with the likes of an *ealamal*."

He paused there, as if to invite me to speak.

"I'd prefer the weapon scrapped," I admitted, "but I agree that no good will come out of pushing the Principate too far. The reasonable compromise would be having people of our own near it, so that it can't be used without our agreement."

The tanned man nodded.

"I speak for the entire Majilis when I say this," Yannu Marave said. "We want the *ealamal* to be made a weapon of the Grand Alliance, like the Severance."

"I don't see Cordelia Hasenbach going for that without assurances," I said. "At a guess, Procer keeping the most boots on the ground around it and maybe even controlling who has access."

Rubies to piglets that the First Prince would cut off a finger before letting Masego anywhere near her angelic doomsday weapon.

"We'd agree to limiting Bestowed access," the Lord of Alava said, "by making it subject to a vote needing to be unanimous. But we want Binders and Lanterns there, so that we can know the nature of the threat. I will not accept our first warning being a tide of burning light on the horizon."

"Preaching to the choir there," I grunted back. "I'd agree to limiting Named under those terms as well, but I want your support in pushing for the Rogue Sorcerer to have a look."

Roland was in that narrow category of people who were both likely to understand what they were looking at and then share that information with me. The Lord of Alava studied me closely.

"Agreed, if you support the same for the Forsworn Healer," he replied.

I hid my surprise. The man was from Atalante from what I recalled, not Levant. And he served up in Twilight's Pass, where no Named from the Dominion had been assigned. There were Levantine troops up there, though, led by Itima of the Bandit's Blood. Might be there was a tie there that'd slipped me by: there were few of my lot in Lycaonese lands, and none I was close to. Either way I had no reason to refuse his terms.

"Bargain struck," I replied, offering up my arm to clasp.

"On my honour," Yannu Marave agreed, taking the arm.

Good, that tended to be reliable in Levantines.

"All that's left is deciding how we approach her," I said. "It will have more of an impact coming from Levant, I'd say."

"If Callow is the one to approach her, she will sound us out and find the door closed," the Lord of Alava replied. "A softer creep, yes?"

"If she doesn't already know we're talking, I'll put up my crown for auction in Mercantis," I snorted. "Besides, soft won't get this done. It needs to be made clear to her she'd standing alone in this, and that her allies are not pleased."

"A common front, then," Lord Yannu said. "Wearied comrades coming to her together."

Interesting. He really didn't want to be the one to swing the sword on this, did he? Worried about the appearance of siding with a villain, or some of the undercurrents of the Dominion's own politics tying his hands? It was a shame that the Jacks knew so very little of the powers that moved Levant, but given the distance and the youth of their organization it would have been foolish to expect them to have spread their net that far.

"That could work," I conceded, sensing pushing for more would get me nowhere. "A dinner tomorrow, after the trial?"

"No point in letting her dig in," the Lord of Alava agreed, sounding amused. "I will make the arrangements, Black Queen, if you have no objection."

"I entrust my honour to your hands," I replied, nodding.

Surprise flickered across the man's face, and though he tried to hide it the courtesy had obviously flattered him.

Lord Yannu of the Champion's Blood would be less flattered if he knew I'd learned the words from the Barrow Sword, I suspected, but I had no intention of telling him.

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I'd expected to derive some pleasure from this, to have to hide it, but when the time came I found that I got no joy from the sight of Christophe de Pavanie being pilloried.

Metaphorically so, that was. Aside from being unarmed and heavily guarded the Mirror Knight wasn't bound in any way. He still looked like a beaten dog as the Sword of Judgement briskly went through the charges laid against him, face bleak as he remained silent unless spoken to. No one wanted to drag more Named directly into this, so the testimony of heroes had been offered in written form instead and the entire affair took no more than a quarter hour. The White Knight made his case methodically, laying no accusation that could not be proven and justifying his charge of 'assault on an ally' instead of 'unprovoked assault on an ally' by specifying that there'd been some fighting between heroes and that he himself had not done as much as he could have to prevent violence from erupting.

It'd keep the Mirror Knight from more severe consequences, but even as I watched the First Prince's face subtly harden I decided it'd been a strategic mistake on Hanno's part. Admitting to heroes brawling amongst each other only helped make them seem less reliable in Hasenbach's eyes, damningly enough not without reason. That my own lot was looking better in comparison was darkly amusing, considering they tended to be significantly worse people. They were, however, *much* better at hiding their misdeeds. The most fire that was squeezed out of the Mirror Knight was when he was probed over his reasons to have acted in such a manner by the First Prince.

"I sought only to prevent the scapegoating and execution of a Chosen," Christophe said, voice defiant. "I took the wrong path in seeking this, I'll not deny it, but the intention itself I will not apologize for."

Cordelia warmly thanked him for his candor with a smile and he looked both surprised and rather charmed. I wasn't fooled, myself. I knew that glint in her eye, as it was cousin to one that'd often gleamed in my own. The First Prince of Procer was looking at a Heavens-ordained victor still insisting even now that his own half-baked sense of justice should trump laws and treaties, and finding indignation rising within her. I suppressed

a wince. Those two sentences had probably done as much damage as the rest of this trial put together. Now she had to be asking herself how many heroes like Christophe de Pavanie there were, for each one like the White Knight.

I could only begin to imagine her horror at the thought of that sort of strength and ignorance bolstering the position of some Highest Assembly cutthroat.

With the charges fully presented and little doubt left as to the truthfulness of them, Hanno asked if the tribunal wanted to deliberate. I was still gauging the risk of being seen as overstepping if I pushed for that when the First Prince voted in favour. I quickly added my vote for to the tally and the Lord of Alava belatedly voted that way as well, looking more curious than anything else. With a majority secured the Mirror Knight was sent out of the room to a nearby one where he could wait until deliberations were finished, and within moments of his departure Arsenal mages put a privacy ward over the room. Cordelia opened the dance without being coy about it, much to my pleasure.

"Before punishment is decided by the White Knight, I have relevant facts to present to the tribunal," the First Prince said.

"By our own rules of procedure, these cannot be charges," Hanno told her.

"They are not, Lord White," she calmly replied. "If I may?"

The dark-skinned knight nodded.

"Christophe de Pavanie has involved himself with the royal family of Cleves, the House of Langevin," Cordelia said. "He has taken for a lover the daughter of Prince Gaspard Langevin and become associated with the plots of that line, though his exact degree of awareness there has not been made clear."

The drow hadn't seen him backing the plot to knife them in the back, that much was true – if Sve Noc had that kind of leverage, they would have given it to me. But he'd not outright refused either.

"Neither taking a lover nor the plotting of others is something that the Mirror Knight can be castigated for," Hanno replied, just as calmly.

Yeah, no one was going to get anywhere trying to get the Sword of Judgement to spice up a sentence according to political necessities. You might as well ask Archer to settle down or the Pilgrim to deal in casual cruelty.

"Ignoring the full circumstances when passing the sentence would be dereliction of duty," I said instead. "You've clearly established the man to be lacking in judgement through your charges, his association with known schemers has to be taken into consideration when addressing the consequences of that lack of judgement."

"Well said," the First Prince of Procer added. "Justice dealt without thought to consequence is no more than the arithmetic of law."

A little rich coming from a woman famous for her mastery of using the Highest Assembly's procedural laws against her rivals, but I'd not answer wind in the sail by poking a hole in the damned thing. Yannu Marave's face had gone cold, though I noticed only when he leaned forward.

"You both seem in agreement that Gaspard Langevin is scheming," the Lord of Alava. "What is the nature of this scheme?"

I cast a look at Cordelia, silently ceding her the right to speak. I was the closest thing the Firstborn had to a representative in this room, but the House of Langevin was *her* headache – and a little goodwill gift now and then helped grease the wheels of this relationship, anyway.

"Designs have made on lands that were promised to the Empire Ever Dark for its contributions to the war," the First Prince said. "Though the plans remained imprecise, and no concrete measures were ever taken."

If the Lord of Alava's expression had been cold before, it was now *freezing*.

"That such an honourless man still lives, much less still wears a crown, is repugnant," Lord Yannu spelled out with excruciating care. "With this scheming against allies he dishonours not only Procer but this entire alliance."

I said nothing, less than inclined to take that bolt for Procer when I pretty much agreed with the man.

"Measures are being taken," Cordelia evenly replied.

"Then let them be taken soon," Yannu of the Champion's Blood replied. "I will not lead my captains in the defence of such a man and his holdings, First Prince. We will not die by the hundreds so that your hungry princes can sink their teeth into new lands."

It would have been inappropriate to let out a whistle there, but I was tempted. The Lord of Alava was being heavy-handed, but given how much honour mattered to the Blood he might be genuinely

offended by what he'd learned. Or, I mused with Vivienne's words in mind, Careful Yannu might just be preparing the grounds for our common offensive at dinner tonight. He was in full face paint today, which made reading his expression rather harder.

"We have strayed from the purpose of this deliberation," the White Knight said.

With that call to order we let the subject drop, though it would not soon be forgotten. I'd said what I'd wanted to and the First Prince had proved true to her word by actually addressing the Langevin troubles, so when the deliberations were called to an end I did not argue against. The Mirror Knight was brought back in and Hanno called for recommendations to be made by the tribunal.

"A public lashing and four fingers," Lord Yannu flatly said.

The Mirror Knight paled but did not speak.

"Reassignment to Twilight's Pass until the end of the war, subordinate to another," the First Prince suggested instead. "After his deeds being made known among all Named and a month in a cell."

He made an uglier expression at that than the prospect of losing fingers, which I supposed said much about how other heroes would respond to his action. A month was a fairly specific length of time to ask for, though. I suspected that it would line up very well with a sentence under Procer law, by mere happenstance of course.

"I'll second Twilight's Pass and the subordination," I said. "As for the rest, I'll trust in your judgement."

A month in a cell would be a waste, so I'd not argue in favour of it, but I was actually in favour of making it known Christophe had tried his hand at a coup. It would bottom out his reputation while the way Hanno had handled him would gild his own. Given the silence of the Choir of Judgement, the occasional reminder that the White Knight was not someone to fuck with had its uses. I didn't want to be seen arguing for the public shaming of an opponent, though, so it was best for Cordelia to be the one doing that – not that I'd missed she was trying to send her inconvenient native hero up in Lycaonese lands, where her support ran strongest, and squarely under the Kingfisher Prince's military command.

My eyes stayed on the White Knight, though, whose serene face I found unreadable.

"Christophe de Pavanie's breaches of the Terms will be made known to all Named," Hanno said. "He will offer apology and restitution

to all those harmed by his actions, after which he will be apprenticed to the Grey Pilgrim for the span of a year so that he might learn from his mistakes."

My brow rose. Was that all? I was relieved when he began talking again.

"After the year has passed, the Grey Pilgrim will give his opinion on whether further action is required," Hanno asked. "If he believes it to be so, this tribunal will be assembled again so that appropriate sanctions might be considered."

I breathed out shallowly. Fuck me, but he'd stepped in it there. From the corner of my eye I saw Hasenbach's back go straight as a spear, and the fact that her anger was that that visible meant she must be *furious*. From a Named perspective, Hanno's sentence was solid work: Tariq, for all his flaws, had mentored dozens of heroes over the years and had an aspect that would allow him unearthly insight into what needed to be mended in Christophe. Honestly, after a year under Tariq I fully expected the Mirror Knight to come out of the experience a better man. But the Grey Pilgrim had also butchered an entire village of Proceran civilians in order to catch Black, back before the Salian Peace, which Hasenbach still despised him for. Now a brewing threat to her authority was being sent to learn at the foot of the same Peregrine. It... wasn't a good look.

"Wisdom was shown," Lord Yannu commented.

Yeah, none of the Blood were going to argue with a sentence that put the Pilgrim in charge of a problem child. He had a steady hand with those. Was this enough for me, though? From the corner of my eye I watched Cordelia and saw clouds looming on that horizon. Time to throw her a bone, maybe.

"I give no objection to this, so long as the Principate is also satisfied," I mildly said.

The First Prince glanced at me, accepting the gesture for what it was – a largely symbolic one, but not entirely without meaning. If she wanted to fight this, I'd lend a hand. Within reason. A long moment of silence passed, the Mirror Knight visibly getting uncomfortable the longer it lasted, until the First Prince finally spoke.

"I will accept this sentence, if the Grey Pilgrim sends monthly reports to the high officers on the subject of this 'apprenticeship'," the fair-haired princess said.

Hanno mulled over that a moment, then nodded.

"That is reasonable," he replied. "It will be so."

And so the trial of the Mirror Knight came to a close, having lasted not even a half hour from beginning to end. It didn't take long afterwards to agree that the Red Axe's own should be tomorrow, though late in the evening.

And yet, for all the smoothness, I could not help but feel there was the scent of a storm in the air.

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It was an amusing novelty to be more at ease in a diplomatic situation than Cordelia Hasenbach.

When the Lord of Alava had said he'd make the arrangements to receive us for dinner, I'd not expected him to actually throw what looked like a genuine Levantine meal. One of the nice halls put together in the Proceran manner had been stripped of its decorations, painted shields having been hung up in their stead. The heraldries had been skillfully painted, I found. My own Crown and Sword had been perfectly presented in black and silver, while the golden towers on blue of the House of Hasenbach drew the eye with their neat arrangement. The colours of the Valiant Champion's Blood were red and orange, but to my understanding the pattern changed from ruler to ruler. Yannu Marave's own was simple but elegant, bold strokes of orange evoking a helmet with a smiling slice beneath it.

The First Prince was clearly familiar with Levantine ways, so she'd come dressed in a fine brigandine of Rhenian colours with a sword at her hip and her hair pulled back in a long three-strand braid. I'd kept to a simple grey tunic myself, though paired with bracers and greaves, and brought a short blade at Vivienne's recommendation. Hasenbach was the first to hand over her sheathed sword to the Lord of Alava when he welcomed her, only to have it handed back as gesture of trust, and though she did not fumble handling the weapon I'd noticed she was not used to having it at her hip when she walked. My own blade was returned with the same formula of 'your honour is known under this roof', which while mostly symbolic was still nice to hear.

Unlike the elaborate affair of when the First Prince had entertained me over dinner, this was to be a simpler arrangement. Levantine ways in some ways reminded me of those of the Taghreb, in the sense that hospitality mattered a great deal to them and that courtesy was demonstrated personally instead of through formal etiquette. It was an honour, for example, that there would be only the three of us at the table and no servants to pour or serve. The Lord of Alava would do so for us himself, showing much more respect than if a stranger were doing it in his stead. The fare was simple but tasty: slices of dried pork ham, a mix of beans, chickpeas and eggs touched with spices and oil, good white bread with some sort of tomato paste.

Lord Yannu was generous in pouring wine, strong red stuff from southern Levant, which did wonders for my appreciation of the meal. Conversation started light and stayed there for some time as we dug in.

"Do you actually know how to use that?" I eventually asked Hasenbach, flicking a glance at her sword.

She'd kept drinking, bound by the rules of courtesy, so I believed the flush on her cheeks to be entirely genuine.

"I can hold a wall, if need be," the Lycaonese princess replied, "I *am* a Hasenbach. My skill is middling, however. I was always better with a bow."

Didn't have the callouses of someone who shot regularly, though, I couldn't help but notice. Probably didn't have the time with her duties in Salia.

"Good bowmen are always useful," the Lord of Alava said in approval. "It is unfortunate they are not as useful against the undead as the living."

"Swords for the Dead, arrows for the Plague," Hasenbach quoted. "There is a proper use for all things."

That was as good a segue as we were going to get, I suspected, and I wasn't the only one to figure that out.

"Some weapons are best left in the sheath," the Levantine lord said. "And there are some who even sheathed cause the wise to be wary."

The First Prince wasn't an idiot, and not interested in pretending otherwise, so instead of playing off the comment she dabbed her lips with the cloth and washed down the last of her pork with a small mouthful of wine. Only then did she answer.

"There are many wise in Levant, I imagine," she said.

"I have known this to be true," Yannu Marave said, face pleasant but eyes cool.

The First Prince glanced at me.

"I don't claim wisdom," I said, "but wariness is dear as a sister to me."

"It pains me to see my allies troubled," Hasenbach mildly replied. "Though I am wary, myself, of troubling the princes sworn to me."

"Your princes trouble *me*," the Lord of Alava replied, dispensing with the pretence. "I have broken bread with Gaspard Langevin,

never knowing he was plotting betrayal of an ally. I will never share a table with any of that line again."

Godsdamn, I thought. While I was fairly sure he was feeding the flame some, the spark at the heart of it struck me as a genuine thing. The twist of those lips was just a little too tight for it to be otherwise.

"You've expressed concerns about the reliability of Bestowed," I said, "and perhaps not without reason. You can understand, then, our concerns about an *ealamal* possibly falling in the hands of less honourable elements within Procer."

She didn't like it, I could tell, but she couldn't afford to antagonize Procer's only two allies by brushing us off. It must not have been a pleasant turn, I thought, to be the one on the outside for once. I was rather enjoying being the one with backing, though. I could get used to this.

"Let us discuss then," Cordelia Hasenbach said, "how all our concerns might be allayed."

After that, all that was left was bargaining over terms.

Chapter 39: Transliteration

"A sinking ship knows no captain."

– Ashuran saying

I wondered if Hasenbach was getting as tired of this as I was.

Probably not. Ruling in Procer involved a lot more wrangling than it did in Callow, or at least the Callow I'd risen to rule – one where most great nobles had been stripped of their lands, and the armies of all but the crown had been severely curtailed. Outside her own Rhenia, the First Prince of Procer's authority had rarely ran further than what she could sway others to grant her. Which must have made it all the more galling that, after years of staying one step ahead of her opponents at home and abroad, she was now getting cornered again and again by a bunch of yokels with swords. I supposed if I'd been fuller of myself than I was I might have started to believe that Hasenbach was losing her touch, or that I was a fine schemer indeed.

I was not so deluded, thank the Gods. The First Prince was being forced to give ground again and again because the Principate was collapsing under her, not because she'd proved to be blind or a fool. The crushing pressures within her realm where simultaneously forcing her to take unwise stands – like trying to claim the Red Axe – while robbing her of the clout that a First Prince with Procer firmly behind her would be able to wield. It was a deathly downwards spiral I'd begun to glimpse, one where to

keep her head above the water she had to risk ever taller waves and even one grave misstep might be enough to see her drown. Still, she was not the only one who had demands made of her. There were matters I could not compromise over.

Trying to keep to that while preventing Procer from bursting open like an overripe fruit was why I'd sought Cordelia Hasenbach out for a private audience and insisted that the White Knight come along. Hanno's dedication to trials under the Terms being treated as genuine exercises of justice was laudable, if occasionally inconvenient, but even he knew that worrying too much about appearances when the hour of need was upon us could only be a recipe for disaster. And so the White Knight had agreed to discuss the upcoming trial of the Red Axe, if not her sentencing, and to try to find a compromise with the First Prince. He was a reasonable man; it'd not been hard to exact that promise from him.

But I also knew that, like all Named, Hanno of Arwad would have lines that his very nature would not let him cross. Hasenbach and I, ultimately, were practical creatures. Our lines were born of practical concerns, either the feasibility of the Liesse Accords or the salvation of the Principate. The White Knight, on the other hand, was a principled man. The lines he would refuse to cross were moral ones, and while I could not find it in me to look down on that neither would I pretend that it did not make him unpredictable to deal with.

"This is nostalgic," Hanno smilingly said, setting down his cup of tea. "I've not had this brew since I was a boy."

Oh, good. Then if I got lucky I might never again have to force a smile after having a sip of this stuff. Even the Firstborn made better tea, and their version of it involved no leaves as well as more fluorescent snails than anyone should be comfortable with.

"I have an appreciation for Ashuran leaves," the First Prince smiled back. "Though I will confess this particular sort was tricky to obtain."

"I don't doubt it," Hanno snorted. "Few Ashuran merchants would willingly sell copper tea. It's not a true leaf, you see. They make from the leftovers and low-quality batches of harvests that can be sold abroad."

"Even your copper tea would sell for more than its weight in gold, back home," I shrugged. "Luxury is in the eye of the beholder."

While by the look on his face I suspected that Hanno would have genuinely enjoyed a conversation about this, it wasn't what we'd come for and so after a few more courtesies the cups went down –

mine only lightly touching my lips once more out of politeness, though I did not actually drink – and we got to business.

“Neither of us is blind to the damage the Red Axe’s trial could wreak on the Principate,” I calmly said. “And no one wants the situation to get out of hand. We’re looking into way to mitigate the issue.”

I wouldn’t back giving the heroine to the Highest Assembly to try, even the series of recent diplomatic reverses Procer had suffered weren’t enough to get me to consider such a thing, but I’d meant it when I’d told Hanno that Hasenbach needed to be given *something*. The question now was what she could safely be given, and while I had my own notion of what that compromise might look like it would be... contentious. I wasn’t sure either Procer or the heroes would go for it. Better to let Hasenbach out one of the contingency plans I did not doubt she had up her sleeve. The First Prince’s glance at the White Knight was measuring, in the heartbeat of silence that followed.

“The Terms cannot be twisted or turned aside,” the dark-skinned knight said. “That would be a severe breach of faith. Yet, as the Black Queen has said, I am aware of the difficulties this trial poses to Procer. I would not cause undue harm if there is a way to avoid it.”

There, what she’d wanted: confirmation that this wasn’t just me dragging Hanno in by the ear so that he might go through the motions of making nice with her. Not that she’d been inclined to think poorly of him, I believed. I’d never deeply discussed either of them with the other, but to my understanding there’d always been a degree of mutual respect there. Not closeness, though. The White Knight encouraged heroes working with the authorities, but never to the extent of becoming part of them. Even the little I knew about the Thalassocracy told me where he might have gained a taste for that distinction. As for Hasenbach, she was understandably wary of the armed Heavens-blessed demigods traipsing around her realm that considered themselves only loosely bound to its laws – and so she must be wary of their leader as well, regardless of his general amiability.

“The trouble in in the primacy of the Terms over our laws,” Cordelia said, “even when applying to individuals of Procer who committed crimes against other Procerans.”

The Red Axe was from the southern outskirts of the Principate, it was true. The Wicked Enchanted had been Proceran as well, and Frederic still was. All three were also Named, though, which complicated things a great deal.

“The matter of the attempted regicide, in particular, will be a contentious matter,” Cordelia continued. “If even rulers anointed by the House of Light can suffer assassination attempts without

Procer being able to give answer, there are some who might argue that we have all been made subservient to the Chosen."

"The Highest Assembly approved of the treaties establishing this," the White Knight reminded her.

"Those treaties were approved when it was believed that the Chosen would not resort to attempting the murder of princes," the First Prince flatly said. "We have been... disappointed, in this regard."

Harsh but fair, I thought.

"Middle ground can be found, I expect," I intervened. "The Terms were not made to last, and we did not expect they would stumble into such challenges. It'll require everyone to bend a little more than they'd like, but that's the nature of compromise. I'm sure you have suggestions, Your Highness, as to what my ally the fears of the Highest Assembly. I'd be interested to hear them."

I found her hard to read, in the moments that followed, as she studied us both. Hesitating, or gauging how far she'd be able to push this?

"As the concerns come from the forced impotence of Proceran law, I would suggest that the Red Axe be made to stand trial before the Highest Assembly," she said.

My brow rose. She wasn't a fool, so that couldn't be all of it.

"The sentence passed would, undoubtedly, be death," Cordelia said. "Its application could be suspended, however, until she has also stood trial under the Terms."

Ah, there it was. If both Procer and the White Knight condemned the Red Axe to death, who was to say what sentence was being carried out when the blade was swung? If Hanno did the deed, or a Proceran executioner, then the balance would be made to swing either way. But there was a candidate to keep the weights even, as it were.

"You'd make Prince Frederic do it," I quietly said. "Since he straddles both worlds. That way everyone can go home with a win to tell their people about."

It'd eat up the man inside, though, I thought. He'd wanted to avoid taking her life. But while I liked Frederic Goethal, his peace of mind was not worth what it would cost.

"A compromise I could live with," I said.

Some of the more paranoid among my charges would smell a rat, but with the Red Axe dead at the hand of the same hero she'd tried to kill I shouldn't get too much pushback. There would be some who'd

have wanted me to bleed the heroes dry over this, but they'd be few and not popular among our kind – the likes of the Headhunter and the Red Knight were powerful, but usually without many allies.

"What is being suggested," the White Knight coldly said, "is not just."

My fingers clenched under the table. Hanno's face had gone hard as stone.

"I will not promise a sentence or an executioner before a trial has been held," the White Knight said. "This is not a compromise, it is a perversion of the oaths we all swore. It does not matter what the Red Axe has done: she has rights under the Terms, and among these is a fair trial."

A steady look was fixed onto the both of us.

"What you are speaking of," he slowly said, "is not a fair trial."

And that was that, wasn't it? As far as he was concerned that settled the matter. And for all that Hanno had gone cold, I thought, the look on Cordelia's face was no warmer.

"Compromise requires both sides to give, Lord White," the First Prince of Procer said, frigidly polite.

"There is no justice to be found in denying the rights of one to safeguard those of another," the Sword of Judgement evenly replied. "All that is accomplished is the shifting around of injustice."

"If a right is abused, then the abuser is no longer deserving of it," the First Prince said. "Else it becomes a tool of oppression."

A little rich coming from a princess of Procer, that, but most of the time I still liked that lot better than Above's so I'd let it slide. At nineteen the scene unfolding before me would have me giddy: the Principate and heroes, both bitter enemies of mine, were at each other's throat. But years had passed, and these days I had too much use for both to be glad of this.

"A mechanism has been established to deal with such abuses," the White Knight bluntly said. "It has yet to fail, in my eyes, and so your treatment of it strikes me as unwarranted."

He wasn't going to give an inch on this, I sensed. It just wasn't in his nature to give that inch over something like this, when he knew himself in the right and all those involved had taken the oaths with open eyes. And Gods, part of me agreed with him. The

fucking Principate was quick to cry foul about the rights of its peoples being 'trampled' these days, but that conscience had been nowhere in sight when it'd been Callowan freedoms on the line. And even now that half the continent had gathered to keep it from burning still it insisted on throwing tantrums over gift horses, never mind looking them in the mouth. Hanno was looking after his own, people whose calling and service he respected and honoured, and aside from all the greater considerations he simply wasn't going to dent his principles over something like princes being uneasy.

The White Knight did not believe it his charge to soothe princes, and so he'd not sacrifice things that he *did* consider his charge in order to do so. It was a fair way of looking at it, if you were a hero.

I wasn't, though. I'd been one of Below's since age sixteen and more importantly these days I was a queen. So while the White Knight wasn't wrong, I did not believe that the First Prince was either. She wasn't throwing a fit over this for pleasure, or even for principle – if Hasenbach's objections to this were personal in nature, she would have stowed them away by now. This wasn't a winning fight for her, and the fact that she was *still picking it anyway* meant that she was afraid of what would ensue if she didn't. More afraid than of the consequences of the mess before my eyes, too, which was more than a little worrying. If the First Prince was coming out swinging this hard, then at a guess I'd say word about Frederic being bled had already leaked to the Assembly. There'd be pressure at her back to do something about this, and while I doubted that unseating her was in the cards there were other ways this could all go to the Hells.

If southern principalities started ignoring her orders because they no longer believed her to be a worthy leader for Procer, the Grand Alliance was in trouble. Weakened as it was, the Principate was still the main source of coin and goods for the war effort and those sure as fuck weren't coming from the war-ravaged north. And while it might have been years since Black torched the heartlands, those lands had never truly been allowed to recover: continued conscription, high taxes and rationing meant some of the richest lands in Procer had never actually gotten back to their old prosperity. No, Hasenbach wasn't worrying about things like *authority* and *legitimacy* because she was some over-proud highborn twit. She was worried about those things because if she lost them then Procer might start coming apart at the seams.

If she didn't come through for her princes, if she damaged their privileges and all the while made heavy demands of them, then why should they keep listening to her? Especially if she lacked the means to force them to.

Sentimentality had me on Hanno's side, but sentiment had to be left a door in matters like these. The needs of the queen took the victory once more, as Akua might have said. And if these two weren't going to reach a compromise by themselves, if there was no pretty stainless solution to be had, then all that was left was the cheap tricks that'd been my trade since long before I put on a crown.

"Procer could be allowed to dispose of the body as it wishes, at least," I said, and sighed when Hanno began to respond, "In the eventuality that there is a body, yes, not to make assurances either way. But if there is a corpse, White Knight, can it not at least be ceded to the Highest Assembly?"

"It would be a petty thing for a heroine's corpse to be parade like a trophy," the dark-skinned knight said, tight-lipped.

"Petty's not unlawful," I said. "So unless your feelings have become rules..."

His lips thinned even further. It'd been a hit below the belt, but then if the Gods Above had wanted me to fight clean they should have shelled out for another five inches at least.

"In principle, I would have no objection," Hanno eventually replied.

It would have been undiplomatic of Hasenbach to point out that this was such a paltry concession as to almost not be one at all, especially given that I'd secured it on her behalf, but from the cool serenity of her face I got the message anyway. She wasn't going to be appeased with a few metaphorical coppers flipped her way. If she didn't get meat to throw her princes, it would be on her they turned their fangs. I angled my face so that Hanno wouldn't see and cocked a brow at her.

"It appears we have reached the end of what can be settled today," the First Prince calmly said. "I thank you both for calling on me, but I believe there is nothing left to say on this matter."

"That seems to be correct," the White Knight said, tone regretful.

Not enough to bend his neck, though, so what did regret matter?

"While I have your ear, Your Highness, I had a few questions about the issues Mercantis," I idly said. "If you're willing, it shouldn't take too long."

Hasenbach considered it for a moment.

"I had anticipated a longer conversation," she said. "I have the time to spare if you do."

Hanno cast me a searching look and I shrugged. He and I had already talked about Mercantis some, and he'd made a suggestion I was warming to – sending the Painted Knife's band there to keep the merchants honest – but Named arm-twisting was only a small part of the matter and he had little to do with the rest. It wasn't his wheelhouse, and if it grew to concern him I'd make it known.

Not that I actually intended to talk about Mercantis.

I gave him nothing to work with, so the White Knight made his courtesies and left. In the silence that followed his departure I glance at the cup of tea I'd barely sipped at, choosing my words as the First Prince's expectant gaze found me.

"There's a way for you to get what you want," I said. "Though I expect you won't like it."

Blue eyes found mine, unblinking.

"Yet here I am," the First Prince of Procer calmly said, "listening."

—

Murder of an ally. Attempted murder of an ally. Aid to an enemy of the Grand Alliance.

The Red Axe would stand trial accused of those three breaches of the Terms, and that the equivalent of a treason charge was the least of the three meant the affair begged for a blood end. The Wicked Enchanter had been an unrepentant monster, but until he stepped out of line again he'd been under protection: his killing must be punished, and as the representative for the villains under the Terms there was only one punishment I was willing to accept. I still had the smoldering remnants of sympathy for the heroine on trial, but she'd known how this would end before she took her first step down this road.

The Red Axe herself seemed utterly unworried when she was brought in. Unlike the Mirror Knight when he'd stood in the same place her hands were bound by shackles and she was chained to a steel ring set in the ground. Masego and Roland had personally traced the wards that would keep her out of the back half of the room should she get free, though it was a lot more likely that the crossbowmen and armed guards surrounding her would get to it first. It would have been counterproductive to gag her, I knew, but as I looked at her calmly expectant expression I found I itched to have it done anyway. There were few things more dangerous in life than someone with nothing left to lose.

I'd expected some ceremony out of Hanno, given his years as the champion of the Choir of Judgement, but instead he was brisk and business-like.

"The charges against the Red Axe have been made known to you," the White Knight said. "Do any of you intend to lay further ones, or contest those I will pursue?"

Denials all around. Mine was barely more than a mutter, my eyes remaining on the heroine.

"Then I will proceed," Hanno calmly said.

The Red Axe laughed.

"Gods, but what a pretentious waste of time," she said, her Chantant lightly accented.

The White Knight looked unmoved.

"Do you understand the charges laid against you under the Terms?" he asked.

"To the Hells with your Terms," the Red Axe said. "They're expedience made law and just as ugly as that sounds. I renounce them, and for you *fine* people who think you have rights over me, I add this-

She spat on the stone, offering up a hard smile.

"Are you requesting that the protections of the Terms be withdrawn from you?" the First Prince calmly asked.

Not surprising. Hasenbach would definitely try to get her hands on the heroine outright, if she could at this late hour, regardless of any deal she and I had made. What I'd offered was barely palatable, while this would smack to her of a clean win. Wouldn't work, of course. I wasn't a fucking idiot, so I'd told Hanno of my conversation with the Red Axe and made sure he spoke with her as well.

"Whether she desires this now or not is irrelevant," the White Knight said. "She agreed to the Terms as made understood to her by the Archer and had not renounced them when she committed the breaches for which she is now being charged."

"Your rules never meant a thing to me, Sword of – sword of what, these days, I ask?" the Red Axe said. "Not Judgement, and nothing I see in this room makes for a good replacement."

"That your word means little does not mean you are exempt from holding it," Hanno replied without batting an eye.

Cordelia glanced at me, but there wasn't a lot of hope on her face and I didn't add any with my own bland expression. Procer would get no help from me if she made a play for snatching now, and Lord Yannu did not speak a word to deny the White Knight's claim. Hasenbach let it go, and we moved on. The first hurdle had been passed.

"Given the number of eyewitnesses to the killing of the Wicked Enchanter, I saw no need for spoken testimony," Hanno continued. "I've selected and now provide thirty different written accounts, which should prove sufficient. If there are any doubts among the tribunal, there are more that can be sent for."

I'd already read some of those parchments and the facts were not in doubt, so I offered the writing only a few looks before setting it aside.

"I confess," the Red Axe said.

A moment of silence. Eyes went to the heroine, which only seemed to encourage her.

"I confess I put down a monster," she said. " That I killed a rapist, a murder and something worse. I *confess* I would have made it slower if I could, that-"

"Guards, please silence the accused until she is called on to speak again," Hanno said.

Spells wouldn't work on her, so it was a gag they had to use. She fought them, and the sight sickened my stomach – all those men in armour around a girl, alone and unarmed and tied up. Named, I reminded myself. One who'd done things that might yet kill thousands, in full knowledge of the risks. The White Knight continued to make his case, as if never interrupted. The Kingfisher Prince's personal testimony was a written one, as he'd decline to stand before the tribunal, but witnesses among my soldiers and the Levantines gave damning account of the attack on the Prince of Brus. The Sinister Physician came in to speak as to how dangerous the wound had been and was followed up by two priests who'd handled the later parts of Frederic's recovery.

With attempted murder of an ally solidly grounded in proof, it was 'aid to an enemy' that was approached. Proof was difficult to establish, when it came to the Bard, and while I recounted my conversation with the Red Axe it wouldn't be enough to damn her. Fortunately for Hanno, once relieved of her gag she was eager enough to handle that herself.

"You want to accuse me of working with the Wandering Bard," she said, amused. "It's a crime now, is it? I didn't. She worked with *me*."

The Red Axe shrugged.

"I wasn't tricked, if that's the story you want to spin," she said. "I knew what I wanted, and she wanted me to get it too. None of what she told me was even a secret. It was just names and places, that's all."

"To be clear, you admit to collaboration with the Wandering Bard?" Hanno asked.

"She talked and I listened," she said. "Sometimes I talked too. Call that whatever you will. Not like it'll make a difference in your little puppet show, is it? You've already got what you need for blood."

Lord Yannu let out a harsh bark of laughter. Well, she wasn't wrong. In principle even just killing the Wicked Enchanter would be enough to get her executed, much less the rest. With yet another confession on the record, the trial was effectively at an end. Hanno asked us if we wanted to deliberate, but there were no takers. Recommendations followed.

"Death," the Lord of Alava said.

"Death," the First Prince of Procer said.

"Death," I echoed.

The Red Axe mockingly laughed. She'd not been gagged, I supposed because of discomfort at the idea of ordering this woman's death without letting her speak in answer to it.

"Half the world clamoured for her death," she said. "What an eulogy that will make."

She wanted, I felt, someone to answer her. To engage. This was the culmination of her story, wasn't it? The moment where she was sent to her death because of her principles, where defiant and dry-eyed she cursed the wicked kings doing her wrong. But no one answered. Because to the rest of us the Red Axe wasn't a righteous heroine about to shame us for our misdeeds, she was the woman who'd endangered one of the treaties keeping the Dead King from winning this war and sweeping over Calernia in a tide of death. No one here was enjoying this, I thought, but *ashamed*? No. We were a long way from that. So instead of a cruel jest or a justification, as she would have gotten in a story, the Red Axe got silence and then Hanno passing her sentence.

"Death," the White Knight echoed. "By beheading, to be carried out by my own hand tomorrow at Morning Bell. The accused will be granted a night to make her peace with the Gods Above, but kept detained until then."

"Pathetic," the Red Axe said. "You're all-"

Hanno called for her to be gagged again, and as soon as it was done asked for the comments from the tribunal. Lord Yannu agreed, sounding largely indifferent, but when it was my turn to speak I had more to say.

"I am satisfied with death," I said, "but today's proceedings should be put under seal instead of made known."

"On what grounds?" Hanno frowned.

"On the grounds that the details of this will make it known to every Named that has issued with the Terms that they've got an ally they can plot with," I said.

"The Wandering Bard is to be declared an enemy of the Grand Alliance regardless," the White Knight said. "What is there to hide?"

"That the Bard is after the Terms themselves, instead of the ringleader of a plot against the Arsenal," I said. "If she just helped thrash the Arsenal, no one will see her as an ally. If this was all a plot against the Terms, though? That's a banner, and those always gather people."

The White Knight cast a look at the other two members of the tribunal, who did not seem to object. I could see him weigh the costs of refusal here and then decided it wasn't worth it.

"Agreed," the White Knight said.

"I am satisfied," the First Prince calmly said.

The Red Axe, even gagged, was laughing convulsively. People did get more perceptive, when standing in the shadow of their gallows. Had she figured it all out, or just that Cordelia and I were acting in concert? Didn't matter, I thought.

It was already too late.

—

I'd not slept well, even with Indrani sharing my bed, and rose early.

I left Archer to sleep and slipped on my clothes, learning when I limped to an early breakfast that it was just shortly past Early Bell – there were still about three hours left before the execution happened. I asked for porridge, the bland but filling kind that remained a Legion staple to this day, and silently sipped at an herbal infusion that'd soothe my leg. It was an odd mood that'd taken hold of me, but I did not fight it. It'd pass soon enough, I knew, and I owed it to the woman I was about to

see killed to at least look what I was doing in the eye. I ended up wandering away afterwards, eventually coming up where the killing was to be done. These were not, I thought, awe-inspiring grounds. More abattoir than gallows: a stretch of naked stone, an executioner's block and a few seats on raised platforms.

Yet for all the bare bone nature of the place I found it carried a sort of cold, impersonal dread to it. Not unlike the Terms themselves, if one chose to look at it that way. The Mantle of Woe pulled tight against me, hood up, I tucked myself away in a shadowed nook and lit a pipe. A stream of wakeleaf gently rose, and I allowed my thoughts to drift. I wasn't sure how long I stayed like that, absorbed in my silence, but when the sound of steel and leather boots came reached my ear I did not need to guess who it was that'd come. There were too many guards for it to be anyone but Cordelia Hasenbach. She approached me without escort and I flicked her a look from beneath the hood.

She'd dressed in dark colours today, if not outright black. They did not suit her well, but cosmetics and jewelry hid the fact decently enough. She came to stand by my side, reflecting my silence with her own. I'd worn no crown, and she only a simple circlet of white gold. My eyes were on the block, and without turning I somehow knew so were hers.

"She is right about one thing, at least," Hasenbach murmured. "It has been an *ugly* affair."

I breathed out smoke, letting it rise in curls. It was a calming sight, familiar.

"I've made a lot of ugly choices, over the years," I said. "I believed them necessary, when I made them. More often than not they truly were."

"It is the exceptions that stay with you," the First Prince said. "A hundred victories will fade, but that sole stinging defeat will sink its hooks."

I smiled bitterly.

"Can't save everyone," I said. "And if you try to, usually you don't even get to save most."

Nauk. Ratface. Farrier. Anne Kendall. There was always a price to trying to make a change. And keeping it standing, when it got done? Oh, that was even costlier.

"Duty is a bed of thorns," Cordelia quietly said, "but someone must lie in it."

"Oh, there's not enough kindness left in me to flinch at this I don't think," I mused. "I was just wondering at how things change, over the years."

"How so?"

"The first two lives I ever took were those of a rapist," I said, "and his accomplice."

She said nothing.

"I wonder if I'm still the one holding the knife," I murmured, "or if another role does not suit me better, these days."

There was a word, for those who protected the likes of the first man I'd ever killed. *Accomplice*.

The silence held until the room began to fill with the few dignitaries who needed to be there. The Red Axe was brought in after the White Knight had already stepped up to the block, a longsword at his hip. She wore only a brown shift, walking barefoot, and though escorted to the fore she went freely. Unafraid. The White Knight gestured for her to kneel, but she refused.

"On my feet," the Red Axe said. "To the end, on my feet."

The White Knight slowly nodded. The heroine turned towards us, gaze lingering on my hooded and smoking figure besides the First Prince's dark-clad paleness.

"I go with all my accounts settled," the Red Axe said. "And no regrets."

She did not close her eye, even when the blade went through her neck with a flash of light. A clean cut, made that way by the searing Light on the edge of the blade. She wouldn't have felt a thing. The head fell, neck burnt on both ends, and the body toppled. Hanno caught her and laid her down, unclasping his cloak and laying it over the corpse. His expression was tight as he rose to his feet, eyes searching for Hasenbach and finding her. His stride was quick.

"The corpse is now passed into the custody of the Principate, as was asked," he stiffly said.

"We thank you for the courtesy," the First Prince replied.

He grimaced.

"What will you do with it?" he asked.

"That is no longer your concern."

Hasenbach's tone was not harsh, but neither was it one that would suffer further questioning. The White Knight's eyes went to me, but I did not meet them. I breathed in the smoke, spewed it out, and waited until he'd left. The room slowly emptied, in the end leaving only the First Prince and her guards along with me. Leaning on my staff I limped up to the body veiled by the White Knight's cloak, Hasenbach keeping pace with me. I laid down a hand on it and hummed. Yes, it could be done.

"Step back, if you don't want to leave the room," I said. "It won't be easy work raising her coherent enough to stand trial before the Highest Assembly."

Chapter 40: Campaign

"A war is not always won with daring, but it is always lost without."

– Florianne Goethal, Princess of Brus

When the First Prince left the Arsenal, it would be with a talking corpse in a locked box.

The work on my end was done, and it'd been exhausting enough that I slept fitfully for a few hours after returning to my rooms. Archer kept watch, and intercepted messages and reports before they could reach me. I woke up halfway to Afternoon Bell with a stiff leg, the undead Red Axe remaining as a little bundle of senses in the back of my mind I could look into if I so wished. I could snuff her out again with a snap of my fingers if I so wished, a precaution I'd judged necessary given who the heroine had made deals with when she still breathed. Let Procer have its trial, and Cordelia settle her princes. I'd made it clear it was the last favour I'd be doing her for some time, and that now it was her time to deliver.

Among the messages Indrani passed me was one from her, which turned out to be a good start on that. She'd officially ratified a treaty making the ealamal a weapon under the Grand Alliance, if not a weapon *of* the Grand Alliance. Yannu Marave and I were being invited to post up to three hundred soldiers each to stand guard over the weapon, with Procer itself promising to limit its own garrison at five hundred. Twenty slots for 'scholarly observers' were offered for each us, with access to the doomsday weapon, though if Named were to be part of that twenty it would require unanimous approval by a vote of the signatory members of the Grand Alliance.

All this we'd agreed over the Lord of Alava's strong wine, but the added list penned by Cordelia's own hand of all Named she was willing to grant access was an unexpected boon. As I'd expected Hierophant wasn't on it, but both Roland and the Forsworn Healer were. Only a few villains were among them: the Harrowed Witch,

the Forgetful Librarian, the Royal Conjurer and the Hunted Magician. Three out of four were Proceran, but honestly of my lot they were the most decent folk that'd be able to get something out of looking at the corpse. The Affable Burglar was the only Named she went out of her way to specify would be allowed under no circumstance, which honestly was fair.

Aurore was delightful, but she had the worst of Vivienne's old habits paired with a moral compass to make a priest weep.

I penned a quick diplomatic thank you note for the First Prince, then a longer message for Lord Yannu mentioning I was still willing to back up his nomination of the Healer if he was willing to do the same with mine of the Rogue Sorcerer. I was willing to get it all going this very evening, if he was. Most of the other messages were minor, the only one of decent importance a formal confirmation that the war council would begin tomorrow through the Mirage. I'd already agreed to that, though, so it wasn't a surprise. What was, however, was the official report I got from the Arsenal research council that a functional, usable Unraveller pattern had finally been made.

Mind you the estimated costs for one were still higher than I'd like – about the same as a good horse – but it'd be worth the coin if they worked as advertised. I'd spend a good horse's worth of gold on an artefact capable of destroying a beorn or even a turtle-ship with a single touch without hesitation, considering how necromantic constructs tended to be the Dead King's means of shattering shield walls. Hells, with a decent supply of those the Lycaonese would be able to hold Twilight's Pass until the Last Dusk – they were a damned stubborn folk, and their fortresses would hard to invest without Keter's monstrous siege engines.

"We've got Unravellers," I told Indrani, grinning. "We still need proper field testing, but they seem to hold up. The Blind Maker had a breakthrough while we were busy politicking – apparently wood soaked in Arcadian water works just as well as that murderously expensive stuff we were bringing in from the Waning Woods."

It was easy to forget that, for all the intrigue permeating it at the moment, the Arsenal remained first and foremost a research facility. That'd not stopped just because nobility had swarmed all over it.

"I want a full quiver," Archer replied without missing a beat.

I snorted.

"Sure, if it comes out of your pay," I said. "Even for your beast of a bow the size of the thing will be a little hard, though."

I passed her the report, which included dimensions, and she looked disgruntled. Yeah, that was more a lance than a javelin. She might be able to throw them – scratch that, she'd definitely be able to throw them – but unless she had a bow made specifically for firing Unravellers she'd not be able to use them as arrows.

"Alexis's silver bow will be able to handle them," she reluctantly admitted. "It's a Gigantes artefact, it can change its shape some."

Huh, good to know. Just for that the Silver Huntress had earned a guaranteed place among the Named that'd be joining the offensive into Hainaut. Assuming said offensive was agreed on by the Grand Alliance, though I expected it would be. That bridge the Dead King was building didn't leave us much of a choice. I had a few questions for Indrani – including whether or not she could spare the Harrowed Witch, now that her old band had been gutted – but we were interrupted by a messenger. The White Knight was requesting, firmly but politely, a moment of my time. I didn't allow myself to sigh until I'd sent back an affirmative that Hanno could call on me.

"Want me to stay?" Indrani offered. "If you want a loomer, I can loom."

"I won't be needing a loomer, no," I amusedly replied.

"I've been practicing this thing with the knives, too" Archer told me, "Where I'm carving away all casual at a piece of wood, but then I change the angle and it makes this *sinister* scraping sound-"

"You're not going to intimidate the White Knight with sinister wood scraping, 'Drani," I told her, lips twitching.

"You can't know until we try," she insisted, then peered at me piercingly. "Good to have that chat alone, then? Shiny Boots is bound to be a little miffed over your latest bout of corpse-snatching."

"He'll have to get over it," I said. "I broke no laws."

"Because that argument always works with heroes," Archer drily said. "I guess you haven't had a polite and oddly preachy argument in too long, something's got to be done to scratch your itch."

"Out with you," I grinned.

"But what about what's *right*, Catherine?" Indrani said in a deep voice, looking at me stoically. "Have you thought about the children, or how this will make angels sad?"

I bit down on my laughter, since otherwise it'd just encourage her.

"Away, witch," I said. "Go chuck terrible sculptures at Masego."

"Heard that might get illegal soon," she replied, cocking an eyebrow at me.

I let out a startled laugh. I'd forgotten my teasing promise to Zeze from when we'd been mopping up the last enemies in the Arsenal, but I shouldn't have expected him to – or to have failed to inform Indrani of it.

"I'll make you royal art thrower," I promised. "Court title with a legal exemption and everything."

"Make sure it sticks under Vivienne too," Indrani requested, "I'm fairly sure the wench likes him better than me."

I managed to keep a serious face at that, which was quite the achievement, and ushered her out before the White Knight could arrive. I was a lot more dishevelled than I would have allowed myself to be in front of Lord Yannu or the First Prince, but unlike them Hanno had seen me on campaign. Staying in a tunic and comfortable boots wouldn't be taken as an insult by him. I poured myself water waiting for him, and before long an attendant was knocking at my door. I dismissed the young woman in question at the door and welcomed him in myself, gesturing for the salon in front of my room. The White Knight was dressed just as fancily as me, his tunic grey to my green, and if anything his boots were more worn than mine.

I found Hanno's face hard to read as he entered and sat, though his continued silence save for simple courtesies did not bode well. He sat and declined the water I offered, expression calm. I lowered myself on the seat on the opposite side of the table, raising an eyebrow to invite him to begin.

"You made the body of a heroine into an undead prop," the White Knight said.

Calm, but it wasn't a friendly kind of calm.

"Legally speaking, Procer did that," I noted. "It employed my services in doing it, true, but I acted on its behalf."

"I expected better of you," he said.

"Oh, fuck off," I flatly replied. "I wouldn't have had to step in if you'd compromised with Hasenbach yourself. The way I asked you to."

"What she asked for-"

"Was hard to swallow," I interrupted, "but she asked it for a reason. Refusing her is fine, Hanno, but if you do then something has to be done to address those reasons. You can't just call it politics and say it's out of your wheelhouse, not when your heroes are half the reason we're in this mess to start with."

"There was no call to compromise, Catherine," the White Knight said. "If the Principate is proving incapable of fulfilling basic treaty obligations it agreed to, it should not be further indulged with concessions. You are acting in a manner that will secure signatures for your Accords but destroy any trust there might be in them."

"I'm acting in a manner that keeps Principate conscripts, food and coin flowing," I said, voice grown cold. "You know, those things we need if we want to have any chance at all of beating Keter. What was done breaks no laws and did not interfere with the sentence you passed under the Terms. You have no grounds on which to complain."

"You could have told me of your intentions," Hanno said. "You chose, instead, to scheme."

His eyes narrowed.

"I am not blind," he said. "You pushed to have the details of the trial placed under seal so that word of the trial in the Highest Assembly will spread among the people of Procer long before the one in the Arsenal does."

"Named will be able to ask about the sentence passed on the Red Axe, as is their right under the Terms," I replied. "They will be told, if they do, that you personally executed her."

It'd come out eventually that Procer had tried a walking corpse, that much was certain – there were too many Named for loose lips not to eventually spill the truth, and the Arsenal itself was not airtight – but by then it wouldn't matter. Hasenbach would have had town criers all over Procer spreading her story first, an apparatus that no Named could hope to match in speed and scope. The people of Procer would treat it as rumours, not the true story, while Named would have the White Knight's own word of having killed the Red Axe to count on. Hanno's own reputation was being used to anchor this, which I suspected was part of the reason he was angry.

"You build your tower on a foundation of lies and confusion," the White Knight said. "It can only crumble."

"If this was about ten people, or even a hundred, you'd be right," I said. "When it comes to a few hundred thousand, though, to *millions*, then all those stories in the back of your head stop mattering. The scope is just too large for a pattern like 'the

secret coming out' to make a dent. Even if rumours linger, more rumours can be seeded to dislodge them."

"More lies," Hanno said. "Making a game of treaties can only lessens them, Catherine."

His expression tightened.

"There was a moment, in that room where we had come to speak with the First Prince, where you decided I had become an obstacle," the White Knight said. "Already you had it planned, suggesting that Procer to get custody of the corpse."

"I'm not one of yours, Hanno," I mildly said. "You got in your own way and it needed to be done, so I did it. If you want pretty ends, get them yourself. Below deals in much, but rarely that."

"This has cost you trust, Black Queen," he said. "From heroes, and from me. You made the choice to go behind my back instead of working together."

And that was true, I wouldn't deny it. But this pretence that I was just a scorpion stinging out of habit was infuriating me, because I wouldn't have had to do anything of this if he'd godsdamned handled it himself.

"This has cost you respect, White Knight," I replied, voice gone hard as steel. "Because the longer you speak, the more I can't help but notice that for all your whining you haven't given a single *alternative*."

The conversation ended there, which was for the best.

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Sometimes I thought about how much gold had been sunk into building the 'Mirage' and winced, but I had to admit that at least it *looked* impressive.

It wasn't that the room itself was large, or all that richly decorated: it was a circle with a radius of maybe a hundred feet, and the place was *aggressively* bare of ornaments. Nothing had been brought into here that might interfere with the enchantments, and even we had been warned to keep our clothing simple. No jewelry, and no weapons were allowed in – and for me in specific, neither my yew staff nor the Mantle of Woe. At the centre stood a great table of stone, carved with small runes that could be touched to silently signal you were requesting the right to speak, and around said table twenty seats of stone had been assembled. Those seats were within boxes of clear glass, which would serve as the medium for the magic, but in truth the entire room was an intricate ritual array hid under the floor tiles.

With all the glass and the strange table, surrounded by smooth walls of polished stone, the Mirage made for an unusual sight. I claimed my seat with a limp, letting a mage attendant close the glass panels behind me, and breathed out in surprise when within moments I began to see around the table people that were thousands of miles away. The illusions were damned convincing, too: I could see the flush on Rozala Malanza's cheeks, and the details of the folds on Itima Ifriqui's skin. It was a shame that there would be no refreshments offered at this war council, given how long it was likely to last, but Hasenbach had suggested that after an hour we vote on taking a pause so at least I wouldn't be stuck in this box forever. It was going to get warm in here, I suspected, considering the openings in the glass were small and meant more to let in air than address heat.

There were too many commanders in the Grand Alliance for them to all fit in one room, much less warrant the expensive arrangements necessary to be connected to the Mirage, so it was only the very highest rung of command that'd been invited to this war council. For the front in Twilight's Pass the Kingfisher Prince had come in person, while an illusion Lady Itima Ifriqui of Vaccei stood in for the Dominion troops in the region. For Cleves, an illusion of my old foe Princess Rozala Malanza of Aquitan had been conjured up while Lord Yannu Marave had claimed his seat in person. For Hainaut, grizzled old Klaus Papenheim had been brought in phantom form while the Kingdom of Callow had its representative in my person. Though not a general, the First Prince naturally had a seat of her own as the highest military authority in Procer.

Going by numbers Callow's presence in the room was almost slightly small, and in truth I'd been offered the right to bring in an Army officer from the Pass to even the numbers a bit, but I'd declined. Dragging Pickler or Kilian into this was unwarranted for essentially the same reason that neither Razin Tanja nor Aquiline Osen were in attendance even though they fielded troops in Hainaut. Hells, it was why General Pallas wasn't here even though her Tyrant's Own numbered more than the troops Lady Itima had brought up north. None of those commanders were of the highest authority in the front. If I told Razin to send out his foot, the boy did it. If the Iron Prince wanted the *kataphraktoi* to screen the flanks of Alamans skirmishers, screen those they did.

While all those people would be told of the decisions made, and participate to the planning of the campaign itself, the hard truth was that none of them were influential enough to warrant a seat here. And not all seats were equal in here, either. I spoke for the entire Army of Callow and was the informal representative for the drow as well, which meant my word weighed heavier than that of any single Levantine or Proceran save perhaps Cordelia herself. Their authority was diluted by their numbers, not

strengthened: Itima Ifriqui could not speak for the captains under another of the Blood, and Malanza couldn't speak for the Lycaonese holding the Pass. My army's chain of command was fundamentally unlike theirs, when it came down to it. Theirs forces were a messy patchwork of personal noble troops and free captains answering this way and that, while mine had been inherited from the relentlessly professional Legions of Terror.

Given the difficulties Cordelia still had in getting her princes in line I might actually have more soldiers under me than she did, regardless of Procer fielding a significantly larger force overall.

There was no small talk, and barely even greetings. Once the spells were stable and the mage-attendants had made sure the links were matched silence was given without even needing to be called for. Everyone knew why they were here, and how serious the matters at hand were. It was the kind of weight that tended to make small talk feel like whistling in a graveyard. Hasenbach did not let the silence linger for long, opening the council with a few brisk courtesies and then getting us started in earnest with the unfortunate realities of our war.

"All of you have, by now, received the information that the Witch of the Woods obtained during her sally beyond enemy lines," the First Prince said. "The Dead King is raising a bridge in northern Hainaut, in the flatlands known as Thibault's Wager. Troops are being massed on the northern shore, and fortifications have been raised to harden the site against assault."

Itima Ifriqui of the Brigand's Blood rapped her knuckles against the table before her, requesting the right to speak and having it granted immediately.

"Did we get hard numbers on what is being massed?" the Lady of Vaccei asked.

"The initial report by the Witch estimated around two hundred thousand on the northern shore," the First Prince replied, "but that was more than two months ago. We have not been able to scry the location since."

"I mean no disrespect to the skills of the Lady Witch," Princess Rozala said, "yet it occurs to me that the Hidden Horror might well have allowed her this vision. I won't argue against the necessity of break that bridge, but it seems to me we are being provoked to battle on his time and terms."

She was right about that much, in my opinion. While I honestly doubted Neshamah had given up the game with the bridge on purpose – he wasn't infallible, we took him by surprise sometimes – he was aware that we knew about his bridge and couldn't afford to

let it stand. He knew a battle was coming in this 'Thibault's Wager', and he'd be prepared accordingly.

"I've been sending native outriders and Helike cataphracts deep into enemy territory," the Iron Prince told us after being given right to speak, "and the reports from the survivors all speak to the same truth: the Enemy is withdrawing deeper into Hainaut. We still get regular raids on our lines but the army Old Bones wanted to strike with while the plague ravaged our backs broke into smaller forces. We think at least half of them are headed north."

I touched a rune on the table with my fingers, which drew Hasenbach's attention, and she gave me the right to speak a heartbeat after.

"It's a safe bet he's fortifying the Wager," I said. "The longer we wait to make our offensive, the more heavily dug-in the dead will be. Revenants, constructs, earthworks. He'll make that place into a fortress."

Possibly literally. The flatlands would become even more strategically valuable after the bridge was built, should we fail to stop that, so it would be a sound use of resources to raise a fortress there. The right to speak passed back to Lady Itima.

"A surprise strike through the Twilight Ways is the answer," she said. "A strong force with Bestowed can shatter the works and retreat."

"And the moment the dust settles on that raid, the Dead King will begin raising a new bridge," Frederic pointed out. "It would be worthwhile for him even only for the forced attrition – how many elite troops and heroes will we lose with every attack?"

"The work can't be done in a day," Princess Rozala disagreed. "It will slow him down enough that we'll get breathing room to muster a proper answer."

"Your theory rests on the Hidden Horror's means to build staying the same," Prince Klaus retorted. "They won't. The longer this goes on, the more bodies he can mobilize."

"If we strike at all, it should be to win lasting gains," Lord Yannu said. "There is only so much blood we can afford to spill over that bridge."

"The strategic reality is that a raid is just pissing away lives," I bluntly agreed. "We have to be able to hold the region, or we'll be doing this again and again. Even if we make this Wager impossible to build in, what prevents Keter from starting work on a bridge a hundred miles upriver?"

"We would be committing to a major offensive entirely on the Dead King's terms, Queen Catherine," Princess Rozala replied. "And if a severe enough defeat ensues, it seems likely that the Hainaut defensive lines will be unable to withstand the counterattack."

"If Ol' Bones gets two hundred thousand of his finest on the south bank, we won't be able to withstand a plain attack," the Iron Prince grunted. "Your instincts are good, Malanza, I mean no slight to them. It'll be a nasty piece of war to slog through, for sure. But I don't see that we have a choice. The Black Queen put her arrow in the eye: this is going to keep happening until we secure the shores of Hainaut."

"It would make the principality easier to defend," the Kingfisher Prince noted. "Barring disaster, having a moat between Hainaut and Keter should offset the casualties taken winning it."

"A plan that accounts for victory but not defeat is not a plan, it is a daydream," Lord Yannu said. "If disaster does happen, how does Hainaut hold?"

"I will be bringing reinforcements from Callow," I said. "The Duchy of Daoine has agreed to send six thousand men, under condition that they are used purely for defensive warfare. Lady Dartwick will hold the command."

Duchess Kegan had been willing to shake loose some of her soldiers, if they were used only to man the defensive lines. I didn't even grudge her the limitations, considering those lines were going to have to be manned regardless: skilled as Deoraithe fighters were, on the field I would rather have more legionaries in the ranks. I would have liked some Watch, mind you, but Kegan had been understandably unwilling to let any of them near the greatest necromancer to ever live. I didn't want Neshamah to get his hands on that mass of souls the Watch got its powers from either, so I'd live with the disappointment. Besides, if they stayed in Callow then they were for Malicia to worry about – and given how few troops were left to defend my borders I wanted her to worry as much as possible.

"Six thousand will not hold back the tide, Your Majesty," the Princess of Aquitan said.

"Neither will hiding behind our walls," I flatly replied. "And even if we suffer a defeat, the Ways mean there will always be a path of retreat the enemy can not follow us into. That will mitigate casualties, and the defeated force could then retreat to the defensive lines faster than the dead can march and replenish its ranks with the reinforcements from Daoine."

"Companies of volunteers are also being raised from the refugees in Brabant," the First Prince said. "Though they will not be

ready in time to participate in a summer offensive, they can at least serve as a strategic reserve."

"Starvelings in dwarven tinpots," Lady Itima snorted. "How many of those poor souls are you raising?"

"Between ten and fifteen thousand," the fair-haired princess replied.

A pretty number, especially when you added my six thousand Deoraithe to it, but no one here was fooled. How many of those ten to fifteen would truly be fighting fit, instead of sickly elders or children too small for the breastplate? If it was even half I'd count us lucky. Procer was at least a year past scraping the bottom of the barrel when it came to recruitment, these days it was digging into the floor *under* the metaphorical barrel. Still, warm bodies with spears could hold the defenses we'd raised. Not well, but long enough for reinforcements to arrive. And with Named to stiffen the backbone, we should be able to avoid a general rout the moment the volunteers first saw what an offensive by Keter looked like.

"Ten thousand starvelings can hold a wall, Itima, if they have a Callowan backbone spread through their ranks," the Lord of Alava said.

"Might be," the Lady of Vaccei grunted back.

"Though our hand is being forced, there is another reason I'm in favour of an offensive in Hainaut," I said. "The Hierophant is close to a breakthrough on a weapon that would make an attack on the Crown of the Dead feasible – and reclaiming Hainaut would be necessary before such a step."

It was good news I'd given them, and it was treated like it. Only Hasenbach knew of Quartered Season in any depth, though both Malanza and Marave were aware that I'd had Masego working on something since the foundation of the Arsenal. Klaus Papenheim, in particular, had finally traded that grim Lycaonese scowl for a distinctly wolfish smile.

"Within three months we should have the artefact itself," I continued, "and though the time required to make it a fully functional weapon is uncertain, it would be ready for use by next summer."

Meaning if we took back Hainaut this year and dug in over the winter, we could attempt to end the war in a single stroke the following year.

"Might we expect a fuller understanding of this weapon soon, Your Majesty?" Princess Rozala asked.

"Once the initial trial is complete, in three months, a briefing will be arranged," I said. "Before that I will only fully inform the First Prince herself and a designated high officer for Levant."

The Levantines shared a look.

"I will be that officer," Lord Yannu said. "It will be confirmed by the Majilis before the end of the day."

I inclined my head in acknowledgement.

"In light of what I've said, I'd like you all to reconsider how you're looking at the offensive ahead of us," I said. "While it's true that Keter will be expecting us to attack, at this time I don't believe the Dead King will be expecting an all-out and sustained offensive to reclaim all of Hainaut. This could be an opportunity for us to do real damage."

"You're suggesting we destroy the Enemy's forces in Hainaut," Frederic said. "Bold."

"I'm suggesting that if this is to be our last offensive before we move against Keter itself, it's in our interest to destroy as much of the Dead King's armies as possible," I said. "Better to face them on the field than behind the walls of the Crown of the Dead."

That siege would already be hellish enough without Neshamah being allowed to pull back his armies in good order and turning his capital into even more of an impregnable nightmare.

"We don't have the numbers for that kind of campaign in Hainaut," Prince Klaus pragmatically said.

"The Firstborn forces under General Rumena are willing to participate to that offensive," I said. "And I'd like for commanders on the other fronts to consider sending reinforcements."

"The defense of Cleves will be made significantly harder by the absence of the Firstborn," Princess Rozala said.

"Perhaps that will remember Gaspard Langevin the realities of his situation," I said, tone gone sharp. "Sve Noc's patience is not without limits. Besides, it is Twilight's Pass I would expect more soldiers from."

"Holding the grounds we've taken is not leisurely, don't let the stalemate fool you," Lady Itima said. "Your raiders ought to have told you this much."

"You believe the Unravellers will stabilize our front enough we can afford to thin the ranks," the Kingfisher Prince said, eyes narrowing.

There was some undisciplined talk at the talk of the artefacts, since to my surprise the news hadn't made it everywhere. Lady Itima had held no idea, and to my surprise neither had the Iron Prince – he must have been away from reliable scrying relays.

"I wouldn't take my mages from you, but Special Tribune Robber and Sapper-General Pickler would both be of great use on this campaign," I said. "Not to mention a few hundred Lycaonese foot."

Prince Klaus looked a little flattered, I saw from the corner of my eye. Well, he knew what I thought of his people as far as soldiering went. Lycaonese fought fierce and rarely broke, there were few better men to field against the dead. Frederic's horse was famous as well, but they were mostly retinue troops and Hainaut was already well served in cavalry by my reckoning. Between my knights, Lycaonese cavalry and the *kataphraktoi* we had a fine array of heavy horse, while Alamans horsemen made for fine skirmishers and outriders.

"If the Unravellers prove reliable, I would agree to lending troops to the offensive," the Kingfisher Prince said.

Not that he could keep Pickler or Robber from leaving if I recalled them, but it would be undiplomatic to withdraw my soldiers without first consulting the commanding officers of the front.

"You don't need my lot, not when you've got Tartessos screamers," Lady Itima noted. "I'll send Moro and a company of sworn blades, but no more."

"I would be willing to contribute Alavan captains," Lord Yannu said. "Should the campaign be soundly planned."

More heavy foot, these, allegedly the finest in Levant. I nodded in thanks at both Levantines.

"If the Firstborn leave and our Levantine friends split their forces, I do not believe I can spare much men," Princess Rozala said, tone faintly regretful. "And of that little no horse, if the drow no longer screen the coasts."

"Setting aside the details of the offensive," the First Prince said, "I now ask formally: is this is council in favour of a summer offensive in Hainaut?"

The vote was unanimously in favour.

Chapter 41: Coterie

"The only thing more inconvenient than being part of an alliance is not being part of it."

– Prince Luis of Tenerife

The last time I'd seen anything near this scale had been the Doom of Liesse, when every major Callowan and Legion force west of the Hwaerte had engaged the Praesi and wights under the Diabolist. Yet, however apocalyptic that day had been, in the end it'd been only one day. The Grand Alliance's attempt to reclaim Hainaut would be a great deal more sustained than that.

The numbers were staggering, when put to ink and impossible to ignore. The Army of Callow would be fielding, in this campaign, a little under thirty thousand soldiers – the entire Second, Third and Fourth Army. Counting only the forces of Lady Aquiline and Lord Tazin the Dominion would be offering up at least twenty thousand, but if Lord Yannu's promises of Alavan captains came through the numbers should end up closer to twenty-five. General Pallas had seven thousand in fighting fit, though before mustering the full roster of the Tyrant's Own she'd want horses brought in since the kataphraktoi were running low on remounts. General Rumena still had thirty thousand to pledge to the offensive, the thinned numbers having actually strengthened the southernmost host of the Firstborn in several ways.

The exact numbers of the Proceran forces in Hainaut were harder to determine, on the other hand, since their chain of command was the stuff of nightmares for any Legion-taught officer. As in most things warfare, the Lycaonese were a notch above the Alamans: the armies of Hannover and Neustria were under the combined command of the Iron Prince, they shared supplies and kept track of their casualties. While they relied a little too heavily on the nebulous rank of 'captains' for my tastes – officers that could command anywhere from a hundred to a thousand foot, horse or even a mixed force of both! – but they were typically well organized and well trained. The northern royals fielded, between the two of them, a solid eighteen thousand. Including four thousand of that solid Lycaonese heavy horse we could never have too much of.

The Alamans forces were contrastingly disorganized, which to my admitted surprise hadn't even proved to be entirely their fault. The last Princess of Hainaut – elder sister to the current one – had hired every fantassin company she could get her hands on the moment Keter began to stir, but a lot of those had taken severe losses failing to defend the northern shore. Half the originally contracted companies no longer existed or no longer fielded the amount of men they said they did, and maybe a quarter of the current mercenaries in Volignac service were 'successor-companies'. Those were, essentially, mercenary companies raised from the survivors of broken ones and laying claim to an old

contract under a different name as the successor of the disbanded company.

The mercenaries were trouble, and not just because they were fiercely independent. Fantassin captains habitually lied about their numbers so that they might claim more supplies from the Grand Alliance, or bargain for better remuneration, and weren't above lending each other soldiers to fake their way through inspections. We hung the captains we caught at this, but that tended to lead to desertions so we had to be careful. It didn't help that even the principality Alamans troops had their issues. There were the forces of three royals serving in Hainaut: Prince Etienne of Brabant, Prince Ariel of Arans and naturally Princess Beatrice of Hainaut. The Arans soldiery was steady, but also under the prince's personal command and he was often reluctant to take risks. If Hainaut fell his principality was the next on the block, he often reminded us, but for all that the Brabant folk were arguably more trouble.

Not because they were as cautious, on the contrary: Prince Etienne had bankrupted himself arming everyone he could in his principality and sending them north when the situation in Hainaut first went bad, which while a brave and necessary gesture was also the source of the trouble. Maybe a third of the Brabantines were actual trained soldiers, even their 'officers' were green as grass and though when they had the upper hand they were enthusiastic fighters their morale was otherwise... fragile. I'd not call a coward anyone who took up arms against Keter, but when you put shoemakers in armour and sent them to fight the likes of beorns they had a distinct tendency to rout. The conscripts had to be closely watched, and carefully used.

The forces under Princess Beatrice Volignac were the fewest, since they'd been bled hard failing to defend their homeland, which I found a damned shame as, practically speaking, it was a force entirely made of veterans. They fought hard, mercilessly, and with a burning spite I could only admire. They were also in some ways the least well-equipped, and the heaviest draw on Grand Alliance resources of the forces in the region: the capital of Hainaut had fallen, as had most its largest cities, so there was little coin behind them and only sparse land to feed them. At this point, the House of Volignac had more fortresses under its rule than towns – and its armies weren't even the largest force within those fortresses.

Accounting for the inevitable lies and grandstanding, our estimates had the total Alamans forces in Hainaut at around forty-one thousand. Fantassins companies made up for about fifteen thousand of that, and the Brabant conscripts maybe another ten to twelve thousand, so that meant more than half the number was less than reliable. If we got lucky the armies of Twilight's Pass would be able to send around ten thousand our

way, mostly Bremen and Rhenia men with maybe a few from Brus. Which meant that at the end of the day, when all those forces would be brought together, there would be around one hundred and sixty thousand soldiers on the field. And that would be on the Grand Alliance's side alone. We were, typically, outnumbered at least two to one by the dead.

The campaign hadn't even begun and already the numbers involved were giving me a headache, so naturally I'd consulted the finest military mind at my disposal as soon as she was fit to be scried.

"It's logistically impossible for you to feed that many soldiers as a single force," Marshal Juniper of the Red Shields bluntly told me. "You'll have to separate them into several armies or you'll run out of supplies after a month or so."

"Our scouts have confirmed the Dead King left the roads mostly intact," I pointed out. "If we march along Julienne's Highway and spread out to prevent raiding, we could have an active supply line."

Named after an ancient First Princess of Procer, the highway was one of the major roads of northeastern Procer: it began in Salia, headed east through the city of Aisne, up into Brabant through the major trade city of Tourges and ended up north in the city of Hainaut, capital of the eponymous principality. It was large, made for wagons and very well-maintained. The Dead King had skimped on the upkeep some, our scouts had said – which made sense since he didn't usually use wagons of his own – but ensured it remained in state to be used by his troops, and therefore ours. It was pretty much impossible to feed this large an army without using carts and wagons to bring in rations so I expected we'd need to do some repairs while we campaigned, but my sapper corps should be capable of handling that much.

"The Hidden Horror will ruin that road the moment it becomes obvious it's the axis of your offensive," Juniper growled. "Think, Catherine. His priority is stalling us while he finishes his bridge, he'll pull out every stone from the defensive line to Hainaut if that's what it takes."

"That's just as much of an issue if we split our force into smaller armies," I pointed out. "They'll have to follow roads as well, if smaller ones. And we might move quicker, with the Twilight Ways, but he's got better awareness out on the field. If one of our forces pulls ahead of the others it'll get surrounded and annihilated."

Or worse, slaughtered and raised anew. Sure, we could open gates into the Twilight Ways – but we could only open so many, and only make them so large. An army trying to retreat from an active battle would lose most its numbers to the retreat, assuming it could even pull one of those in good order. My legionaries and

the Lycaonese probably could, but the Levantines and the Alamans? They were brave and hardy fighters, I meant not disrespect there, but they weren't *disciplined*.

"You're looking at it from the wrong way," Juniper said. "Going up the Highway you'll get stuck in one of the natural bottlenecks. The dead could mass in Lauzon's Hollow-"

It was the name of a natural 'pass' leading the highway into the hilly and rocky highlands of Hainaut, which while not exactly narrow was steep-sloped and easily defensible. Last year during our offensive we'd taken the dead by surprise there, smashing the force defending it with a deep raid of kataphraktoi backed by Named and then held it open long enough for our army proper to arrive. That trick, though, would not work twice.

"- or the overpass fortresses at Cigelin," she finished.

Fortresses was something of an oversell there. *Les Soeurs de Cigelin*, or the 'Cigelin Sisters', were a pair of large towers overlooking a dip in the hills the highway passed through. They'd been built atop very abrupt slopes at the point where the dip was deepest, one on each side, but the real danger was the chain-gate they commanded. A massive chain allowed a portcullis of enchanted steel to be raised or lowered across the road, and while it was hardly an unbreakable obstacle given enough mages or sappers it would be a costly strongpoint to force. Last time we'd used the Ways to go past it and then struck the garrisons holding the towers from the back, after drawing them out, but it'd slowed us down by at least a sennight. There wouldn't have been *nearly* as many nasty surprises waiting for us near the capital if not for that delay.

We'd torn down the fortresses and the chain-gate as we retreated, of course, but I knew better than to expect not to see them standing again this summer.

"We need those places under our control, Juniper," I pointed out. "By the time we get to the capital it'll be filled to the brim with corpses led by Revenants, which means a siege unless we want to throw away several dozen thousand soldiers storming the walls."

And we couldn't have a siege without supply lines to feed our soldiers, that much went without saying. Julianne's Highway was our best bet at such a thing.

"You are throwing away your only strategic advantage, superior mobility, to turn your army into a lumbering battering ram you want to smash through every gate until you reach Hainaut itself," the orc growled. "Losing scrying is making you too cautious, Warlord. If you split your army in three along three lines, the first taking the blue road towards Luciennerie in the west-"

I kept an eye on her profile in the mirror but the other was on the map spread out in front of me, displaying northern Procer. Luciennerie was a minor fortress by size, but it was the key to western Hainaut and more: holding it would give us control of the blue road when it went further west into Cleves, and so allow us to anchor our flank to our allies there.

"- the second marching up Julianne's Highway in the centre and the third going east by the old mining roads, aimed at Malmedit-"

Malmedit was a city, at least in principle, though even before the war against Keter it'd been turning into an empty husk. The city had grown out of multiple mining towns fusing into a single larger one, and lived off the ore trade, so when the ore had run out the people left for greener pastures. The Dead King had dug tunnels from further north that connected to the old mine shafts and he used the city itself as a staging area, since the lands beyond Malmedit itself weren't really fit to march an army across. If we took the city, though, we could collapse the mine shafts and shut the door on Keter's fingers.

"-then all three losses would be severe enough he'll have to commit to battle," I finished with a frown. "But he won't shy from that, Juniper. He has the bodies to spare, and he knows that if he defeats even one of those armies he can turn this entire campaign into a rout by collapsing that flank."

If either the eastern or western army was beaten back, the central one would have to withdraw or see its supply lines cut by raiders. If it was the central army that was beaten back it'd be even worse, as both other armies would have to retreat for the same reason.

"So he'll commit forces against all three offensives," Juniper said. "He'll be going after that victory hard, because if he wins it and finishes the bridge he has a decent chance of overrunning as far as southern Brabant before a defence can even be mounted. And when his armies are committed, his reserves emptied, then the fourth army – the one you kept back, kept quiet – take the Twilight Ways and hits the capital directly. While it's been stripped of defences."

My eyes narrowed as I stared hard at the map. It was a bold plan, it was true, but then that tended to be Juniper's preference. And the basics of it held up to scrutiny, I thought. Once the dead committed to the battles, once they sent their soldiers out, it would not be possible for them to be recalled in time. They'd have to race across broken terrain, often without roads, while we cut through with the Twilight Ways. The army that assaulted the capital would be taking a risk, but if it paid off... We could keep a strong garrison in Hainaut then send forces to hit the enemy in the back as they tried to hold off the army going up Julianne's Highway, taking the dead in a pincer. Victories there, which

should ensue swiftly, would open the road to the capital and allow for supply lines to be established.

Hells, with the dead out west and east stuck defending fixed positions we might even not suffer too badly from raids on it.

"It could work," I admitted. "And the smaller armies would lessen the burden on our logistics a great deal. Mind you, that's also thrice as much supply line to defend."

"I'd wager they won't even raid, at the start," Juniper grunted. "Keter will want you in deep before striking, it won't want to risk spooking you. After that, well, that's what you've got all that Alamans horse for. It sures as Hells isn't to win battles."

I snorted. The Hellhound's enduring dislike of Proceran light horse continued to amuse. Especially since she'd several times suggested Callow acquire its own in the past, should we ever get the means. Juniper appreciated the value of light cavalry on the field, which was hardly surprising given her taste for winning by manoeuvre. It was just that she believed, and I tended to agree with her, that Alamans light horse was useless against most kinds of undead. Unlike Proceran peasants the skeletons wouldn't break and flee when charged at, and the riders just weren't armoured heavily enough to withstand staying in melee long. As skirmisher, outriders and patrols they were still leagues better than anything else we had but given how many of them we had I'd have eagerly traded a few thousand for their equivalent in northern horse.

"It needs refinement," I said. "And I'll need to take it to the other commanders. But it sounds like the bare bones of a plan."

We didn't leave it at that, of course: I still had at least two hours before crippling headaches indisposed the finest general of my generation, and I intended to use every moment of them.

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It was another five days until the delegation from Mercantis arrived at the Arsenal.

I was not part of those who received the six merchants lords led by an ambassador. Given the amount of gold the crown of Callow still kept in the city — from the coin the dwarves had paid me for my... mediation down in the Everdark — I'd been expected to, and my absence did not go unremarked. I left them to the First Prince, knowing that as long as I kept handing her such pretty hooks there were few fish she would not be able to catch. My hours were spent arranging the upcoming campaign, consulting both Vivienne and Juniper when I could and then taking those increasingly refined plans to the regular war council. Prince Klaus had his own notion of how the campaign ought to be

conducted, but they were not incompatible so steady progress was being made.

After two days of being ignored, the diplomatic party from Mercantis realized that I had not the slightest intention of reaching out to them. They tried to arrange something through Cordelia, who to my great amusement 'declined to interfere in Callowan affairs', so when faced with that failure they finally took direct steps. It wouldn't be that easy, though. When the merchants sought an audience with me I passed them off to my designated heiress Lady Vivienne Dartwick instead as a calculated insult. They'd walked out of the room as soon as it was halfway polite to do so, Vivs told me afterwards. Good. I wanted them angry: anger would dull their edge, and dullards was what I wanted to deal with. The letter I received from Cordelia that evening was short and unsigned, but undoubtedly hers.

They want you at the table, the First Prince said. They want something from you. Anger them further.

It was heartening to see that these days Hasenbach knew me well enough not to even doubt my ability to infuriate other people. I was no noble, and I was hardly a deft hand at the games of those born to that station, but when it came to giving slights it must be said that I was rather well learned. I sent a messenger to arrange a meeting with the head of their delegation, Ambassador Livia – making sure her name was misspelled, a detail as petty as it was personally satisfying – but sent Lady Henrietta Morley as the Callowan representative. Vivienne's secretary was known as a lady as a courtesy title, as while she was the heiress to Harrow she had no lands of her own, and she held no formal position in my court. I was later told that sheer disbelief that she'd be snubbed this way had Ambassador Livia stick around for nearly half an hour before she left in a fury. I received a formal letter of complaint about my rudeness from the Mercantians, and without missing a beat responded by handing it over to Archer so that she could do a theatrical reading of it in the meal hall.

Indrani got a few Alamans priests to sing as a background chorus while she declaimed it in the style of epic poetry, which I thought was a nice touch. It was the little pleasures that made life worth living.

I knew Hasenbach had read them perfectly when they *still* tried to get me in a room after that. Mercantis officially requested an audience with the high officers of the Grand Alliance, to speak of the large loans it had extended over the war effort, but to my amusement this time I didn't even have to do a thing. Lord Yannu flatly refused to have the matter considered a Grand Alliance one, since neither Levant nor Callow had taken loans. So what was it that Mercantis wanted from me sorely enough they'd suffer repeated insults and still try to have talks? The merchants lords

of the City of Bought and Sold were a proud lot, and not afraid to make their displeasure known when provoked. Whatever it was they wanted, they must want it *very badly*.

The following day I threw in another slight for good measure, requesting that they be contained to lesser parts of the Arsenal while war councils were held through the Mirage, and it must have done the trick because that afternoon I got another letter from Hasenbach. *They want Cardinal*, it said. *Owned or buried*. It took me, I had to admit, almost entirely by surprise. But it shouldn't have, looking back. A neutral city at the crossroads of Calernia, whose neutrality would be backed by several realms and a treaty binding Named? It was a natural rival for Mercantis, who would still benefit from the ease of transport over lake and rivers but lose out in most other regards. Cardinal would be, to the Consortium, the death knell of their influence.

It would do worse than destroy them, in their eyes: it'd make them just another of the Free Cities, another squabbling city-state the great powers would run roughshod over with little consequence.

"Owned or buried," Vivienne repeated.

I'd shown her the letter before consigning it to flame.

"Buried begs no explanation," I grunted. "So long as the Red Flower Vales remain a fortified border instead of a city, Mercantis is still presumably the main trading partner for Callow."

Trade with Procer had, even back in the days of the Fairfaxes, never been widespread. It'd been mostly restrained to luxuries, and even that much had died after the Conquest when Praes shut down the borders. Mercantis' days of influence over my home were soon to disappear anyway, though. Even if Cardinal never saw the light of day, I intended on seeing peace between Callow and Praes: my homeland's grain would start heading east instead of downriver, and the need for a middleman starkly decline.

"Owned is trickier to ascertain," Vivienne frowned. "The land for Cardinal will have to be ceded by Callow and Procer, so they can't possibly think to buy it. At a guess, they want control of the trade in the city."

I slowly nodded. It made sense. The concessions needed for the Consortium to have such a stranglehold would probably involve privileges granted by laws and treaties, which they could not help to secure without Callow's assent. They had leverage on Procer given how it was in debt to them – though thanks to Cordelia's caginess they likely didn't realize quite how *badly* indebted the Principate was – but they had little they could realistically strongarm me with. The Callowan gold in the vaults

had been placed there by the Kingdom Under, so they couldn't do a thing there without angering the dwarves. That left pretty much only threats to sabotage the finances of the war effort as a whole. After all, while the defensive fleet of Mercantis meant it would be hard to attack militarily the city had so few mercenaries left to call on at the moment that the thought of it attacking Callow with any degree of success was laughable.

"So we know what they want," I grunted. "And why, at least in part. Now we move on to the trickier parts."

We had their aim and their angle of attack. In a sword fight that would be enough for any halfway decent blade to settle the match, but diplomacy was not so clear-cut. Hasenbach would have sweet-talked them into a degree of trust towards her, by now, since she was good at being mannerly and they believed they had a knife at her throat. The nature of this game was that the First Prince just wanted to settle this to everyone's satisfaction – but mostly Mercantis' – while the Black Queen was just being the worst sort of ruffian. Catherine Foundling, right? What a wench. Have another cup of wine, ambassador, and tell me more about what you want so that I might help you get it. No, on the silk glove side I considered us to be well handled. It was the steel I'd have to bring to bear, and that was more delicate than you might expect.

Too much steel and you had a fight on your hands, too little and they shrugged you off. There was an art to it.

"It can't be anything physical or provable," I mused. "Else we'll have a legitimate diplomatic incident on our hands."

My being a prick to their diplomats wasn't that, even if they liked to pretend otherwise. I was in no way obligated to grant them an audience if I didn't feel like it, though after my slights if the shoe was ever put on the other foot they'd be perfectly within their rights to humiliate me just as publicly.

Assaulting the diplomats, though, would be something altogether graver. It'd soil my reputation, Callow's and push them closer to Malicia.

"Don't forget the Tower will likely have a man or woman in the diplomatic party," Vivienne pointed out.

I didn't bother to say that we couldn't prove that, since even if I had doubts that Malicia had outright subverted one of the merchant lords into her service I had no doubts whatsoever that she'd bribed at least one to spy on her behalf. There was a reason they'd been brought in through a fake location and kept blindfolded through the translations. So the enemies to beat here were fear and greed, I thought. Fear of being left behind by the world that would rise from the fall of Keter, greed for gold and influence and power over others. I didn't have the know-how to

craft an acceptable settlement deal with Mercantis, but that wasn't to be my role here anyway: the First Prince would see to that end of it. My part was forcing the merchant lords to back down from their ambitions, so that Hasenbach could slide in and offer them that alternative.

"So it will," I murmured back, then shook my head. "I need to talk to Masego."

Vivienne cast me a wary look.

"Why?"

"Because he knows the wards of this place inside out," I said.

Including those protecting the diplomatic quarters where our friends would be sleeping.

"Make it known to the First Prince I'll need a few days," I told Vivienne.

I did not insult her intelligence by specifying this should be done secretly. It was important that she and I not be seen to be collaborating, as part of our strategy rested on the appearance of us being at odds. If I was out of control, Cordelia could not be asked to prevail upon me with sweet reason. Why, I was trouble for her as well! I'd wager some of them would suspect something was going on, but the cordial working relationship between Hasenbach and myself wasn't exactly public knowledge. And it couldn't be denied that my stint as the Queen of Winter had left me with a... reputation. I was not above using that, if it came down to it.

"I'll handle it," Vivienne said, then cocked her head to the side.

She hesitated.

"Yes?"

"What for?" she asked. "The days, I mean."

I hummed, considering.

"Best you don't know," I finally decided.

"That reprehensible?" she asked, brow rising.

"It's better for the both of us if you keep your hands clean," I patiently said. "You know that."

She breathed out, as if gathering patience of her own.

"I know you're trying to smooth the path of succession," Vivienne said, "but this is getting out of hand, Cat. I don't need to be protected."

"A lot of your appeal as a queen will be that you're made of paler cloth than me," I bluntly replied. "It would be counterproductive for you to start tainting your reputation."

"I ran with you for years as the Thief," she said. "That ship has sailed."

"You also fought in a rebellion against Praes," I pointed out. "Look, Vivienne, I didn't pick your name out of a hat. I can trust you to take care of our home, and I respect your ideals. But we have to be practical about how this gets done or there's going to be trouble. I'm a warlord with no real claim to the throne, and you're deriving your legitimacy from the howling void that is mine. If this is going to hold without a civil war, you need to be popular enough no one wants to fight you. That means sometimes you'll have to be distanced from necessary evils so your reputation stays clean."

"There's no one else here, Cat," Vivienne calmly said. "For whose watching gaze are we doing this distancing?"

My irritation mounted.

"If you're not going to be involved, there's no reason for you to know," I said.

"To give advice," Vivienne said. "To provide a second pair of eyes. To make suggestions. Unless you no longer consider me fit to serve these purposes."

"I didn't say that," I sharply replied.

"I know," she said. "But you've been using this as a reason to take a step back from me, Catherine. For some time now."

That sounded like an accusation, even if she'd tried to make it otherwise. It was also infuriatingly vague.

"What are you saying, exactly?" I asked, frowning.

"That it would be natural if it stung," Vivienne delicately said, "that even after all you have done, since the truth about Diabolist has been known, there are some among our countrymen who would rather see me reign than-"

My fingers clenched.

"Enough," I cut in. "*Enough*. We are not talking about this."

She looked at me, and it burned that Vivienne looked not angry but instead tired and a little sad.

"We will have to, sooner or later," she replied.

"I have actual real problems to deal with, Vivienne," I told her through gritted teeth as I rose to my feet. "Instead of... whatever this is. Handle what I asked you to."

I didn't wait for an answer. I left the room limping, headed for Masego and the answers he'd have for me.

It felt like fleeing.

Chapter 42: Castigation

"Do not look down on fear, my friend: it is the rare case of a voice in your head actually helpful to your survival."

– Dread Empress Prudence, the 'Frequently Vanquished'

I'd seen some profoundly beautiful things over the years. I sometimes liked to remind myself of that when the bad days came. I'd seen the first breaths of Liesse reborn under twilight, the peace born of a good man's sacrifice. I'd walked the ancient cities of the Everdark, where flowers lit up the dark and poetry paved the streets as a riot of colours claimed the rooftops. I'd been hosted in the finest palaces of Salia, felt a storm sweep over me from the heights of the Tower and strolled through the mad bazaar at the heart of Skade. I'd even glimpsed the last glory days of Sephirah, before death came for it. I'd seen wonders enough to fill two lifetimes, and perhaps before I died I might see yet a few more. It felt good to remember that, to believe that.

But I'd known terrors the likes of which few could fathom, too, and it was those I would be calling on for this kind of work.

There was no lack of them to draw from. Black had preferred. I recalled, to use fear as a watchman's cudgel: sparingly, measuredly, and always bluntly. He'd seen it as a tool, and not a particularly good one. But while my father had been my first teacher, he'd not been the only one. I'd learned from the Empress and the Diabolist, exemplars of the most horrifying Wasteland virtues, and then from even harsher creatures. The King of Winter and his patient, farsighted cruelties. Shrouded Sve Noc, a godhead born of fear and blood and kept hallowed through the same. Even the Dead King had, in his own way, been a teacher: you could not fight such a monster as long as I had without learning some of its ways. And so, honouring those many tutelages, I set to crafting horror.

I began with the smell.

Death had a particular reek to it. It came to the aftermath of battles along with the rest of the carrion, that stench of blood and shit and steel – with the rotting of flesh never far behind, even as the crows gobbled up the dead and flies burrowed into the flesh. I drew from the Doom, from the Battle of the Camps, but it wouldn't be enough. Death come to a city wasn't quite the same, even before stone and flesh began to burn green. A hint of the Hierarch's madness spread through the streets of Rochelant, red hate bleeding out of every pore, and more from the burning blaze of green that'd begun at my very feet and devoured a fourth of Summerholm. All this I wove together and made my own, then slipped into the sleeping mind of Ambassador Livia Murena.

Her sleeping self sunk into the dark and gave me my opening: a glimpse of the winding streets and beautiful avenues of Mercantis. Night coursing through my veins like a river, eyes closed as I cut myself off from my senses and skimmed around the edge of the wards protecting the ambassador just the way Hierophant had taught me, I smiled and sunk my teeth into the older woman.

I began with murder. Livia Murena felt warm blood splash her face as a drow in the colours of the Losara opened the throat of a man with an obsidian blade. The ambassador screamed and stumbled away, wiping away with her hands and finding them soiled red. There was no relief to be found away from the drow. She turned the corner into an avenue only to find it burning green, legionaries dragging people out of houses and butchering them in the streets, eyes cold and hands steady. Livia Murena ran, finding a large plaza with a sprawling marble fountain, but painted Levantines of the Brigand's Blood were there. Some amused themselves by drowning people, holding their heads under the water until the panicked scrabbling against the stone died, while others were pulling down a great statue with hammers and rope. Livia Murena let out a strangled sob, and as she did a painted warrior threw a barbed javelin at her that tore through the flesh of her shoulder.

Bleeding, in pain, she ran again.

She found only horror. Orcs tearing at the corpses of merchant lords with hungry fangs, armoured ogres smashing through villa gates to rip apart those huddling behind them, Taghreb and Soninke making bonfires of paintings and tapestries to roast the loot they'd ripped out of pantries over the corpses of their owners. Goblins made servants race only to shoot them in the back with crossbows, the drow blinded the young and let them bleed out screaming, jeering Callowans dragged entire families to the gallows to hang. Livia Murena wept but kept running until she found a tall house. Hers, I intuited, but it was not the house she sought. A wife, and though the face did not come to my mind's eye long blonde tresses and fair skin did. It was enough.

Green flames and heavy smoked filled the halls of Livia Murena's home as she raced through them and up, up the stairs and at the end of a too-long hallways where finally her great bedroom could be found. Relief as she found her wife standing there, besides the great canopy bed. *Cassia*, she exclaimed. With a crisp, resonating twang a coin went spinning. Livia Murena's eyes went to it, spellbound, watched it rise and fall and land onto the open palm of the Black Queen, who had been sitting in the dark. The coin, shining gold, had landed on the side showing crossed swords.

"Do you believe in fate, Ambassador Livia?" I asked.

And before she could answer, her wife burned green. I drew on the screams from Three Hills, for that. I remembered those well. *Cassia* screamed and screamed and *screamed*, until mercifully she died. I met Livia Murena's eyes and smiled, thin and sharp like a blade slid between the ribs.

"Not the right answer," I told her. "Let us go again."

And we did.

Mercantis was put to the sword and the coin showed swords and *Cassia* burned.

"Not the right answer," I told the weeping ambassador. "Let us go again."

And we did.

And we did.

And we did.

Nott until dawn did I let her learn the lesson this had been meant to convey. *Cassia* burned, the screaming having grown more vivid as the sleeping ambassador filled the gaps, and Livia wept exhaustedly as she fell on her knees. Like an old friend I leaned forward, offering a girlishly mischievous smile.

"Fate's a trick, Livia," I told her, and showed her the coin.

It had the crossed swords on both sides.

"The only way not to fall for it," I said, gently smiling, "is not to flip the coin at all."

I left her dreams alone, after that, but she slept not a wink anyway.

—

I was in Hakram's infirmary room more often than my own quarters, or the offices made available to me – I'd pretty much handed those over to Vivienne – so it was there that messengers came to find me. It was the same with Archer, when she returned from the little errand I'd sent her on. I dipped my bread in the warm potage that was to be my morning meal, cocking an eyebrow at my friend.

"So?"

"Didn't drive her mad," Indrani replied, settling into the seat by my side, "but I'd bet it was a close thing."

I popped the bread into my mouth and chewed on my mouthful thoughtfully. I'd walked the line just fine, then. If I kept doing this for too long I'd probably break the ambassador, which wasn't the objective here, but I wanted at least one more night of this. Once could be dismissed as a fluke, but twice? Twice was a warning.

"What'd she look like?" I asked when I'd swallowed.

"Exhausted and twitchy," Indrani said. "You really didn't pull your punches there."

"She needs to be more scared of me than she is of Malicia," I replied, "and if we're to get through this without Mercantis trying to blackmail the Grand Alliance, then I need that fear deep enough in the bone that they know *exactly* what the consequences of that would be."

"Hey," Archer shrugged, "you know me – I could care less if you want to turn the lot of them into gibbering wrecks. I'm just surprised it's the two of us alone having this conversation, I guess."

I threw her an unimpressed look. That had been less than subtle.

"If you have something to say, say it," I told her.

She sighed, passing a hand through her long dark hair. Unbound, today, and a little messy. It suited her.

"You been fighting with Vivienne?" she asked.

My fingers clenched. She noticed it, unpleasantly perceptive as she was.

"So that's a yes," Archer mused. "I'd ask you if you want to talk about it, but I don't think you've ever actually answered that question with a yes in your life."

"That's pretty rich, coming from you," I flatly said.

Our last tense heart to heart had required half a fistfight to get started. She looked more amused than offended, waving the reply away.

"Sort that shit out, Cat," Indrani said. "I won't try to use sweet reason with you, because Gods know the odds on that are steep-"

"Hey," I reproached.

"- but her sister cold-hearted logic will do," Indrani blithely continued. "It's too late for you to dismiss Vivienne from her place as your heiress: she's got support, and when it comes to us she knows where a lot of bodies are buried. So if you won't talk to her because she's your friend and you're being pissy for things not really her fault, then at least do it because otherwise you're being a pretty terrible queen."

I grimaced. Archer didn't really care about Callow except maybe in the sense that a lot of her stuff was there and it'd affect some people she cared about if it got destroyed, but that didn't mean she was unaware it was good angle to take with me. She wasn't wrong, at least, that I couldn't just let this go forever.

"I don't like that I have to do things, now," I admitted.

Indrani's brow rose. I snorted.

"I mean that, when we disagree, I have to compromise with her now," I explained. "Not always, and not on everything, but it still irks that I have to do it at all. I gave her the title in the first place, and 'Drani it's not that I think she'd done badly with it, on the contrary-"

"But she's got power of her own now," Archer finished. "And she doesn't always agree with you."

"I can't just tell her to fuck off either, when we disagree," I tiredly said. "If I do that in public she'll lose a lot of support in the Army of Callow, and if she loses the Army there's a lot less dissuading nobles from taking a swing at the crown down the line."

It wouldn't be a sure thing, and I was doing my best to polish her military record so that she'd have some reputation with the soldiers, but at the end of the day Vivienne just didn't get on with them the way that I did. On occasion I'd taken some petty satisfaction in that, given how the nobility made no qualms of its preference for her and more people back home that I was comfortable with shared that opinion, but it was a hollow thing to embrace. After putting her in that position in the first place, how much of a prick would I have to be to relish her difficulties? It wasn't a minor matter, either. There weren't

Dartwick household troops for Vivienne to call on, she had no personal holdings and most noble forces had either been abolished with their titles or curtailed under Imperial law. Within Callow, after the war it would be the army Juniper and I had built that'd stand as the largest amount of people with swords.

My banner had the sword weighing more than the crown on the balance for a reason.

"I bet it's like a burr in your boot that some of the folk back home like her better now," Indrani knowingly said.

I breathed out, keeping my face calm.

"I'm starting to get tired of hearing that," I evenly said.

She squinted at me.

"Yeah, that's about the face you would have made," Archer said. "And Viv's never been great at handling your moods, so now you two fine ladies are in snit. Lovely."

"It'll pass," I grunted.

"It'll pass when you have a drink with her and you spell it out," Indrani said. "But you already know that, Cat, you just don't want to do it. I'm guessing you'll get to it once you're done tripping over the pride you keep claiming you don't have."

I flipped her off, but without much heat, and she took it in stride.

"Go find out what the Mercantis delegation will do to proper up their defences after tonight," I said, having tired of this conversation the moment it began. "I want to know as soon as possible so I'll know how to get around it."

Another night of this, maybe two, and then I'd be ready for the talks. Even as she left, I began to consider the shape of the nightmare that would plague Livia Murena tonight.

It was not going to be any more pleasant than the last.

—

I'd let Hasenbach pick the room where, at long last, the diplomats would get their meeting.

I went to visit it beforehand though, to have a look at what I'd be working with. It was yet another hall from the seemingly endless supply of them the Arsenal had to offer, though this one was clearly not meant for meals. Multiple tables facing each other in half-circles, enough room between for servants to pass and no less than six ways in — as much for refreshments as the

fetching of documents, I figured. Well lit, but with chandeliers and mage lights. I could work my way around both of those, I knew the tricks. It would do. I'd need to strike the right tone from the start, though. Come in alone and with not a thing in hand, when they'd be laden with attendants and papers.

I trailed a hand atop the smooth surface of the table, enjoying the grain of the wood, and frowned in thought. Ambassador Livia had only gone through another night of my tender attentions before I – Archer – had judged her to be on the ragged edge. Not a faint-hearted sort, that one, but I suspected a great deal more used to doling out cruelty than suffering it. Part of me wanted to throw in another night just to be sure, but there would be risks to that: the protective amulets the ambassador had worn after the first time might not have been a match for Night paired with the Hierophant's eyes, but if the Mercantians asked for heroic protection this would get trickier. No, best to end it here.

Today, this very evening.

I napped through most of the afternoon, as using Night had been less than restful, and woke less than half a bell before we were due to hold the meeting. The clothes I was to wear were only of middling import, a simple grey tunic and matching trousers, but I made sure to wrap around myself the patchwork banners of the Mantle of Woe and set a jagged iron crown on my brow. With the last errand I'd asked of Indrani tucked away into my pocket and my dead staff of yew in my hand I limped to our appointed time, though with careful timing so that I would be the last to arrive. Not so late that it would be remarked upon, but just enough to be mildly insulting. The doors were opened for me by attendants, and even as my name and titles were announced I flicked an assessing glance at the people within.

That Cordelia Hasenbach had brought a number of scholars and secretaries was nothing unusual, but that she'd brought a full fifteen people with her was. She must have pieced together that she'd be handling the actual negotiations here mostly on her own. My gaze did not linger on them, instead moving to the delegation from Mercantis. Ambassador Livia Murena was easy to pick out from the rest: she sat at the centre, and her ostentatious gold and ivory chain of office was hard to miss. On the ivory medallion at the end of it thirty silver coins had been carved, the ancient crest of the merchant lords of the Consortium. Seven golden braids hung from her left shoulder, over a robe of deep blue silk that made it plain the ambassador was overweight.

Most of the diplomats were as well, for fat was considered a sign of wealth and power among the merchant lords of Mercantis. All wore blue silk and the seven braids denoting that they were here on the behalf of both Merchant Prince Fabianus and the Consortium

itself – the prince's business could carry three braids of gold, and the Consortium's seven in silver, but only both in agreement could command the seven golden stripes – but for all the riot of bracelets and rings dripping from their arms and ears laden with and precious stones, no one save Ambassador wore anything around the neck. Each diplomat had an attendant standing behind them, all of them young and beautiful and utterly still. Mercantis did not practice slavery, it was said. Of the Free Cities, only Stygia still kept to that horror.

Yet Indrani had been raised a slave there, and called such, though no doubt if pressed her owner would have had papers proving it was mere bonded service. All very legal, nothing at all like *slavery*. That was the trick, you see: the 'servants' began with the debt of the sum it had cost to acquire them, and though they were paid for their work the roof and food they were provided cost them money. The debt increased, and the service continued until death – and then was passed onto children, for debts always carried in Mercantis. I kept that knowledge in mind, looking at the dark rings around Ambassador Livia's pale brown eyes that cosmetics did not quite manage to hide, and found that guilt never came for the torturous horror I'd put this woman through.

I'd done worse to people a great deal less deserving.

"Queen Catherine," the First Prince greeted me amiably. "I am glad of your presence."

"Your Majesty," Ambassador Livia said, tone even, "we are—"

"Let's wrap this up quickly, Your Highness," I interrupted, looking at Cordelia. "There's a war on, in case you forgot."

The ambassador was well-trained, so she did not betray her offence at the casually offered insult. It wouldn't be the first I'd thrown her way since this started.

"I assure you, Your Majesty, that I have not," the First Prince replied, eyebrows rising the faintest bit.

A warning to tone this down? No, I decided after a moment. She would have had other ways to reach me if restraint were called for. I slid into the seat at the edge of the part of the half-circle kept empty for myself and my delegation, seeing from the corner of my eye the dismay that flickered across some Mercantian faces when they realized I had come alone. That was not the mark of someone taking all this seriously. I drew lightly on the Night, softly, and wove a thread that slipped into the shadows beneath the table and to the side. It remained hidden, waiting. I leaned back into my seat, looking impatient, and waited for someone to speak.

"I must protest the insults you keep offering us, Queen Catherine," Ambassador Livia said. "Has the Consortium not been a generous and understanding ally? What have we done to earn such treatment?"

This was the part, I thought, where I was supposed to demur and weave and bob and all those little diplomatic dances. So we could keep talking in precise truths and pretty lies, keep this all civilized as we tried to a war of words just as dangerous as one of steel. I did not bother.

"Either you genuinely don't know the answer to that question," I said, "and speaking with you is a waste of time. Or you *do* know the answer to that question, and you are *still* wasting my time. Which is it, Ambassador Livia?"

Her face tightened for the barest fraction of a moment before going almost unnaturally slack. That one had stung, huh. I glanced at the First Prince, whose face was the very definition of polite serenity.

"Is this serious?" I asked.

"It is, Queen Catherine," Cordelia amiably replied, then half-glanced at the diplomats. "Though perhaps we should see to the purpose of this meeting, given the demands made by circumstance on all our hours."

Under the table, she traced with a finger a Y against the Night. Yes, it meant. I was not to keep pushing them, she wanted this to advance.

"That would suit as well," the man to the ambassador's side smoothly said. "If there are no further objections?"

An expectant gaze went to me. Ambassador Livia had regained her calm on more than a surface level, so it was her I replied to.

"By all means," I drily said. "The suspense has me all atwitter."

"Given information recently acquired by the Consortium, it has become necessary to revisit the matter of the loans extended to the Grand Alliance," the ambassador said.

N, Hasenbach's fingers traced against the table. I pushed back my chair and rose to my feet.

"There are no such loans," I flatly said. "As Lord Yannu Marave made exceedingly clear, I believe. This meeting is at an end."

She looked, to my faint amusement, genuinely surprised. For career diplomats, they really weren't catching on to this game quick. It wasn't that they were fools, I thought, but simply that they weren't used to so bluntly being *dismissed*. Mercantis might

not be a power in the leagues of Praes or Procer, but it'd always been influential – and when crossed, it was not above spending coin to make its displeasure known.

“Perhaps the honourable ambassador refers to the loans extended to the Principate and its constituent principalities,” the First Prince mildly said. “I am sure the unfortunate wording will be rectified, Queen Catherine, if you give the ambassador opportunity to do so.”

I cocked a brow at the ambassador.

“We did not mean to imply that the Kingdom of Callow is indebted to the Consortium, Your Majesty,” Livia Murena lied. “My apologies for the misunderstanding.”

Barely refraining from rolling my eyes, I settled back into the seat.

“As was mentioned by our esteemed ambassador,” the man at Livia’s side said, pouty red lips offering up a smile, “the Consortium has learned of the particulars of Proceran debt. Given the almost... reckless borrowing practices that were used, doubts have been raised as to the capacity of the Principate of Procer to repay these debts.”

“Gods Below and Everburning,” I said, tone openly contemptuous. “You really are going to insist on being the Tower’s borrowed knife, aren’t you? No matter how many people warned me, I’d genuinely not believed that the Consortium would make that glaring a blunder.”

“A hollow accusation,” Ambassador Livia replied. “And one thrown very carelessly, I might add. There are limits to our tolerance, Queen Catherine.”

Y, Cordelia wrote. I changed course, snorting in feigned amusement.

“You know what?” I mused, “Maybe you’re right. I just *assumed* that you lot are going to try something as hilariously ill-advised as attempting to coerce an alliance that commands more soldiers on a single front than there are people in all of Mercantis. That was premature of me. Go on, then. Speak.”

I thinly smiled.

“Prove me wrong,” I said.

There was a beat of silence.

“We recognize the heroic contributions made by the Grand Alliance, and Procer in particular, to the safety of all Calernia,” Ambassador Livia said. “It is why we have been so

willing to extend loans, and at rates with little precedent. The Consortium will continue to support the war effort however it can, rest assured that this is not in doubt."

"That is most pleasing to hear," Cordelia mildly said. "His Grace Fabianus has reconsidered my request to expel the Praesi embassy, then?"

I smothered a grin. She had them there, considering Malicia was the Dead King's open – if rather lethargic – ally.

"The high court of the Consortium is debating such a measure, Your Highness," Ambassador Livia smiled.

"Indeed," Cordelia Hasenbach smiled back, just as pleasantly, "yet I recall hearing the debate was to be set aside indefinitely. Has this measure been revoked?"

"That is quite possible," the ambassador evaded. "Given the length of our journey here, our news are grown quite out of date."

"You were leading up to a 'but', Ambassador," I said. "Do get on with it, instead of insulting the intelligence of everyone in this room."

"While the Consortium remains firmly behind the war effort," Ambassador Livia said, tone aggressively calm, "given the financial troubles of the Principate and its extensive amount of loans it has been suggested that assurances must be sought. Else a collapse of Proceran commerce could feasibly, in the coming years, bankrupt Mercantis itself."

"A reasonable worry," the fair-haired princess replied. "I have pondered this issue myself, as it happens. The Highest Assembly is willing to sign a treaty guaranteeing a set portion of the taxes collected by the office of First Prince until the debts are settled. Would such an assurance be acceptable to you?"

Promising coin that had yet to be collected, huh. I supposed that was one way to make up for lack of revenue. Mind you, if Cordelia's eventually successor refused to pay up there honestly wasn't that much that the Consortium would be able to do about it. *Unless the treaty is guaranteed by the Grand Alliance itself*, I thought, and glanced at Hasenbach. Even the most firebrand of First Princes would hesitate at antagonizing its two most powerful allies in such a way. *Canny woman*, I thought, not without fondness. It wasn't like myself or the Dominion would refuse to be guarantors of this: it'd give us some leverage over Procer after the war, which given how short-lived Proceran gratitude tended to be would prove most welcome.

Somehow I doubted it was a coincidence that this arrangement would end up soothing some of the lingering fears about Procer belonging to the two nations Hasenbach wanted to keep as close allies. Circles within circles within circles, with this one.

"It would go some way in abating worries, Your Most Serene Highness," Ambassador Livia replied, "yet to invest more coin into the war, the Consortium seeks more practical dividends."

Ah, and there we were. Her eyes went to me but did not linger. She never looked at me for long, I was beginning to notice. Even when she was talking to me. The nightmares had left a mark, as they were meant to.

"It has come to the attention of Mercantis that plans are being drawn for a city to be raised at the heart of the Red Flower Vales," the diplomat with the pale brown eyes said. "Cardinal, is it not?"

I drummed my fingers against the tabletop in open impatience.

"We recognize such a city for the opportunity it is," Ambassador Livia said. "And so in place of further loans, the Consortium seeks instead to purchase monopolies on the trading of certain goods in Cardinal."

I cocked my head to the side. Huh. That was cleverer than what I'd been expecting, actually. They had to know that purchasing land ceded by Callow and Procer was not a suggestion that'd go over well, but monopolies over trade that did not yet exist was another story. By putting up gold now they could get a stranglehold on certain kinds of trade down the line, effectively pushing out any competition by being the sole providers for long enough that people would grow used to relying on them. It was their old role as middleman made anew, I thought with a touch of admiration. The merchant lords were a greedy but they were not without wits. This was actually halfway reasonable, as far as demands went, which had me rather wary.

"And how long would these monopolies be expected to last?" the First Prince asked.

"Permanently," Ambassador Livia said. "This would reflected in the price offered for them, naturally."

I did not need Cordelia's finger to trace the *N* to know this was not to be tolerated. So this was to be the pivot of this little adventure. Now they would push, or be pushed.

"Mercantis," I said, enunciating the word slowly. "The City of Bought and Sold. The most impartial place there is to be had on Calernia, for coin is queen and it claims no party."

"A lovely compliment, Your Majesty," Ambassador Livia replied, smiling like a shark.

"Spell it out," I said, leaning forward. "What happens, when I laugh at this and tell you to crawl back to your island."

I drew on Night. Slowly, quietly. The shadows of the room began to lengthen, in the spaces between the glow of the mage lights and the chandeliers.

"There is no need for such hostility," the diplomat said. "We will not withdraw our support for the war effort, as I have said. Yet it would be difficult for the Consortium to consider extending further loans when it would be courting its own bankruptcy."

Which sounded all nice and reasonable, until you knew what we knew. Hasenbach had told me that Malicia was almost certainly aware that Procer needed the flow of gold from Mercantis to keep its head above the water. Malicia had in turn told at least *some* of these fine fellows the piece of information. This had the Empress's touch all over it, the more I saw the more it was obvious. As usual, Malicia had played to all the angles. Merchants not in the know would not consider ending loans to be enemy action, and if the Grand Alliance reacted harshly they might turn to the Tower for protection against our perceived tyranny. Merchants that were in the know, and there were bound to be a few, would consider us to be deep enough in the hole that they could extract concessions from us if they didn't push it too far. No doubt the Empress had made promises of protection to encourage that perception, and leaked information about where our armies were.

Very far from Mercantis, the bottom line was.

"I'm curious," I said. "You must believe – I can't understand this, otherwise – that you have the upper hand here. And I have to ask, Gods, I really have to ask–"

The Night deepened, the light dimmed.

"*Why?*" I coldly asked. "Why is that you think that, exactly? Explain it to me."

"No threat has been made, Queen Catherine," the ambassador said. "Your behaviour is–"

"Let me tell you what happens," I softly interrupted, "if you choose to become my enemy."

I met Livia Murena's eyes. Darkness deepened around us, and came a faint sound like the dying whisper of a scream.

"I will not be civilized," I gently told her. "I will not keep to laws and treaties, to decency or the milk of human kindness. If you become the tool of a woman who has allied herself with the King of Death, if you *willingly* make that choice, then I will visit a ruin on you that will still haunt the sleep of men in a hundred years."

She looked away, towards the First Prince.

"Your Highness-"

"Don't look at her," I said. "It won't help. She can't stop me, and she doesn't particularly want to."

The ambassador's pudgy fingers tightened around her chain of office and she turned back to me, gathering her courage, but my hands had slipped in the pocket where I had stowed away my last surprise.

"Do you believe in fate, Ambassador Livia?" I asked.

She did not answer, eyes fixed on the golden coin in my hand. There were crossed swords on the side that could be seen. The other woman's breathing went uneven, her hands trembled, and still I waited. Sweat drenched the back of her neck, smudged the cosmetics on her face, and in her eyes I saw reaped the terror that I had sown.

"Yes," Livia Murena hoarsely answered. "Yes, I do."

"Then let us keep to laws and treaties," I said, my smile never reaching my eyes. "To decency and the milk of human kindness."

Or else, I did not say. She heard it anyway.

I did not speak another word for the rest of the meeting, or need to.

Chapter 43: Conclusions

"I have been assured that my enemies lie behind every shadow, which is why they will henceforth be illegal."

– Dread Empress Sinistra III

During one of the first conversations I'd ever had with Black, he'd told me that he did not believe rule through fear alone could be sustainable. I found it one of those lovely little ironies of life that my first teacher had arrived by cold pragmatism to share that belief with Cordelia Hasenbach, who'd gotten there largely on account of being a halfway decent person. Whatever the reason, in practice it'd ended up meaning that while we could have bullied Mercantis into withdrawing with nothing to show for its efforts they'd instead been thrown red meat. Not in

the quantity or quality they'd wanted, but enough that they'd have something to chew on besides their pride.

In the event of a lapsed debt by princes, Hasenbach committed the office of First Prince to taking up the debt in their name and repaying it from diverted taxes at a fixed rate. She also guaranteed payment in goods if coin was not forthcoming, for up to a third of the worth of debts and offered that both commitments she'd just made would be guaranteed by a treaty under the aegis Grand Alliance. To sate the hungriest of the merchant lords, she even sold a handful of monopolies as well: only for a duration of ten years, however, and they would solely be enforced in Proceran lands.

Mostly it was monopolies on goods in which Mercantis already dominated trade – perfume, cloth, dyes and enchanted luxuries – that were sold, which would essentially serve as a ten-year stay on competition in those goods whether or not the monopoly was enforced in Callow. My kingdom had neither the skilled artisans to begin trading in such goods nor the gold to sink into building the workshops necessary for their creation. In time we might, but the merchant lords would have quite the head start by then and no competition from the greatest realm on the surface of Calernia while they took it. My people lost nothing with this and might yet gain, though. The audience ended coolly but not with hostility, and the matter was considered settled.

For now.

The following days went by quickly, the last stretches of haggling over how the Hainaut campaign was to be raised and waged – Malanza was still trying to trade back some of the drow sigils for Arlesite foot and horse, the Iron Prince wanted fewer prongs on the attack than Juniper's suggested three – occupying my hours along with regular meetings with the White Knight to discuss which Named should be assigned to the campaign. So far it was skewing a little heavily favour of heroes for my tastes, but we were starting to figure out what a functional roster would look like. A haze of anticipation hung in the air of the Arsenal, as all awaited the arrival of the envoys from the Titanomachy.

They were the last loose end left to tie up, and when they were tied we'd return to the business of war.

—

When the Gigantes did arrive, they startled me with their swiftness.

We had less than a day to prepare between the first warning that the three giants had reached Iserre and their unexpected arrival in the Arsenal. The fortress in Iserre where they'd appeared was used to cross into the Twilight Ways but wasn't actually one of

the translation points, just a shortcut to head towards one in southeastern Salia. Which made it all the more of a surprise when the three giants emerged in the translation room of the outer gatehouse to the Arsenal most of a day later. Neither the swiftness of the march nor the direct crossing into the first level of Arsenal defences were something any of our people would have been able to replicate, Hierophant privately admitted to me.

I got the message the Gigantes were sending, as I expected the Procerans and Levantines did as well: there were mysteries at their disposal we could only dream of, and we should not get too cocksure even after all we'd managed to build.

The hastily arranged welcoming party for the envoys ended up being a headache to wrangle. The Titanomachy still did not have any formal diplomatic relations with the Principate, and while it was dubious they'd attack the First Prince if she stood before them that did not mean they would be willing to speak with her. Which meant Hasenbach couldn't come, and if Procer couldn't have someone in attendance then to save face it would be best if the Grand Alliance simply 'elected to send a single representative'. I voted for Lord Yannu Marave to handle it, given the Dominion's cordial if distant relations with the Titanomachy, but he voted for me and the First Prince abstained.

A round of bickering later, I ended up sent out when the whole matter was settled by our being notified that Hanno intended on going to greet the Gigantes himself. If the heroic representative went so must the one for villains, while Lord Yannu and I could not *both* go – it'd make Hasenbach's absence all the more glaring. Masego tried to be there as well, rather transparently so he could have a look at the Gigantes from close with his magical eyes, but I turned him away. He could try his hand at that later, when the diplomatic claptrap was over with. And so I found myself standing once more atop the stairs leading down to the stone floor where the translation ritual would take place.

At least I wouldn't have to go down the damned stairs again, so there was that.

I wore formal clothing in black and silver, a crown set on my brow and the Mantle of Woe on my back as a pointed reminder of the two offices I was standing for here. The White Knight was in plate with a sword at his hip, though he'd chosen not to wear a helmet. We'd exchanged a few courtesies after I arrived, a dozen attendants from the Arsenal staff standing behind us, but while there'd been no brusqueness from either part we'd quickly lapsed into silence anyway. Neither of us were in much of a talking mood. There was a little more to it than that, of course. Since our conversation over the fate of the Red Axe, we had not once shared words save in our official capacities.

There was a price to everything, I'd learned that lesson early – and never forgotten it since, as fate went out of its way to refresh my memory every few years. My thoughts did not get to linger on the subject, as a shiver of power in the room warned that the Gigantes were soon to be among us. Leaning against my staff, I had a look over the edge from the high vantage point.

Immediately it became clear that this was not the usual ritual. The gates in and out of the half-realm that served as the funnel into the Arsenal had a particular look to them, like a cut into the fabric of Creation that rippled outwards, but the large gate beginning to open was nothing alike. A broad and tall rectangle bordered in shining glyphs came into being at once, with a muted blast of air, and along the inner side of the border there was a small tremor. The filling of the rectangle wavered, and I realized it had been almost like a cut as the layer between the Arsenal and the travellers crumpled and shrivelled into nothing. Slower than our own method, I noted, but it looked more stable and their gate was perfectly aligned with the ground on both layers of reality.

I wasn't sure that was actually *possible* under the laws of Trismegistan sorcery.

The Gigantes came in without fanfare, or for that matter human mages guiding their translation. I'd not been sure what to expect, as I'd never seen any member of their race before and illustrations in books tended to vary wildly. Their height was impossible to miss, of course. The tallest must have been thirty feet tall, and the others but a few feet shorter, which had them standing taller than the ledge I've been using to overlook the platform. Though there was some variation between them, their skin was a deep brown and looked rather coarse. Though shaped not unlike humans in much greater proportions, there were easy differences to pick out: they had long, powerful legs and their necks were noticeable shorter.

Their clothing was light, eerily beautiful white cloth which had no stitches but instead complicated folds that revealed a triangle of brown flesh beneath the neck and went down in a tunic that covered down to the lower legs. It was belted with flashing bronze, fashioned as a hundred little cards of the metal interlinked, and the short-sleeved cloth revealed arms covered by winding, curling patterns of flowing gold. It was the same with the parts of their legs bared, and their sandals were polished stone bound by sinuous copper strings. Two had beards, of the same dark brown as their skin, which were without a moustache and went down to their chest in luxuriant curls – to the side they went up to where ears would have been on a human, though on the giants there was only smooth skin and a small cartilage-like ridge.

All of them had shaved their heads in part, though the one without a beard instead had a long stripe of hair beginning near his – her? Hard to tell, I saw no difference in body shape – brow and going all the way down to the back. Their eyes were startlingly human-like, though, I found. Perhaps a little pale for our kind, but otherwise much the same as ours and similarly topped by eyebrows.

The gate collapsed into the ground behind the giants without a sound, and there was not a trace of it in the heartbeat that followed. They took slow steps forward, careful of the arched ceiling above, and the tallest of the three – he had a beard, and unsettlingly luminous blue eyes – subtly moved his head and arms while his body otherwise remained eerily rigid. Hanno moved, at my side, the way his own head moved to the side displaying what I believed to be friendliness and deference. The Gigantes shot me a cursory look, which I returned with a face like a blank mask.

"I am Ykines Silver-on-Clouds," the giant said, his Lower Miezani only slightly accented. "Amphore for the Hushed Absence, envoy of the Titanomachy. I greet you, Queen of Callow."

I'd not expected him to recognize me, to be honest. It unsettled me some, even though I could reason it away at the cloak and crown being rather distinctive. *Amphore* wasn't the title Hanno had called this one by, I thought with a frown, when we'd last spoken of the Gigantes. It'd been *skope*, I was certain. From context I'd gathered that *amphore* was a higher title, though I was uncertain as to what it entailed. Before I could answer the greeting, the envoy turned towards the White Knight. They moved their bodies in ways that were too quick and slight for me to really catch any of the nuances.

"I greet you, Guest of the Nine Peaks," Ykines said.

"I welcome you in peace," Hanno replied.

"Indeed," I said, forcing myself not to cock my head to the side. "You are all welcomed to the Arsenal, as guests of the Grand Alliance."

"We receive your hospitality," Ykines Silver-on-Clouds said. "Slumber will be required for some hours. After, the Titanomachy can be heard and heard in turn."

Blunt, though I didn't particularly mind. I didn't hound the envoys with small talk, instead passing them to the awaiting attendants. Most of the hallways of the Arsenal were too low even if the giants bent their bodies, so it would be a specific itinerary they had to follow. Their rooms would be fitted for them, at least, though they'd be lodged in the Repository instead of the Alcazar. Their 'quarters' were a repurposed warehouse, though it'd been decorated richly enough I wouldn't have believed

it if told. Following through exactly on their word, the Gigantes disappeared into their quarters and did not stir in the following hours. Knocks on the doors were not answered.

It'd been early morning, and it was only mid afternoon that they emerged. Lord Yannu's presence was requested, as was the White Knight's, and for a few more hours the doors closed. They broke only for a communal meal – Gigantes apparently did not eat much meat, to my surprise – and then cloistered themselves away for one last hour. The two humans left after that, and I was not entirely surprised to receive a messenger from Hanno soon afterwards. I agreed to meet without delay and limped my way to one of the Alcazar halls not too far away.

He'd changed out of his armour, I noticed, and settled into his usual grey tunic. A few papers and scrolls took up part of the table where he'd sat, as well as a quill and inkwell, but it looked a light workload. The White Knight duly rose to his feet when I entered, which I dismissed with a grunt as I took a seat on the other side of the table. Hanno had asked for the meeting, so as I sipped at the glass of water he'd poured for me I waited for him to speak.

"The Myrmidon has volunteered to participate to the Hainaut campaign," he told me. "Since the Grey Pilgrim will be participating as well and the Mirror Knight will be with him, the Anchorite must stay in Cleves. The principality grows too lightly defended otherwise."

My brow rose. Not the conversation I'd expected, though it wasn't unimportant either. Cleves was admittedly getting low on Named, since both the Exalted Poet and the Maddened Keeper had come from that front and they wouldn't exactly be coming back.

"I can leave the Red Knight there, if you're worried," I said. "Though not the Headhunter, that tracking trick is much too useful."

The Red Knight was one of the finest killing Named on my side, but she was also deeply unpleasant in a lot of ways. There were only so many times you could be told that the weak should die and the strong take what they wanted before it became more than slightly grating. No, given the difficulties inherent in juggling a coalition of Named it might be wiser to leave her regardless – I could even cite Named running thin in Cleves as the reason why when she inevitably complained about being left out of the offensive.

"That would be appreciated," he nodded. "I also intend to reassign the Stained Sister from Twilight's Pass to the Cleves theatre, unless you have a major objection."

My brow rose.

"She's been doing well there, last I heard," I said.

Hard old girl, the Stained Sister, and her affinity with Light made her very useful against the massive necromantic constructs that the Dead King used as siege engines up north.

"I need someone to take up leadership in Cleves," the White Knight admitted. "With the Mirror Knight gone, the eldest hero in the region is the Anchorite and they are... not a good fit."

Yeah, spending forty years in exile in the mountains did not tend to do wonders for one's social skills. The Myrmidon was probably second in the heroic pecking order there, right now, but while an impressive fighter all her languages except some obscure Penthesian dialect were a little shaky. She also despised the Red Knight, a feeling violently returned, which made her even worse a fit. The Knight wasn't exactly a leader of villains – I'd assigned mostly Named with an independent streak in Cleves partly as a way to prevent her from gathering a power base – but she was the strongest of my lot in the region, which carried some weight.

"You need someone good with Light assigned to the Pass," I said. "We're already pulling out the Forsworn Healer, they're starting to look a little bare up there."

Of the three villains in Lycaonese lands – the Bitter Blacksmith, the Affable Burglar and the Skinchanger – only the last was truly fighting fit in my opinion. From Above's lot the Daring Pyromancer had proved worth twenty times his weight in gold since he'd come from the Free Cities and the Bloody Sword's appearance as the first Lycaonese hero of the war had been a massive morale boost for his countrymen, but for all their skill neither of them could smash a *beorn* the way a Light-wielder could.

"The Stalwart Apostle will be heading there, the Astrologer has agreed to take charge of her," he countered.

Ugh, that Ashuran lunatic. I didn't care how often she'd predicted storms, what she did was just specialized scrying and not some sort of unearthly discipline. Still, she was older and not prone to getting herself killed. There were worse mentors to have. Like the Skinchanger, who the Lycaonese would probably have gone wild over as their first Named in at least half a century if she'd not also been a shapeshifting cannibal. That, uh, tended to put a damper on things.

"The Unravellers are proving effective, so I'll make my peace with it," I sighed. "You hear back from the Swaggering Duellist?"

"He still considers his honour sworn to the protection of the First Prince until next winter solstice," Hanno replied, "even if she personally orders him north. We'll be without him."

Shame, the man might be next to useless in an actual battle but he'd be a right headache thrown at Revenants.

"The roster's taking shape," I mused. "Archer is leaning towards releasing what's left of her old band, right now. If she does, I take it you want the Paladin for up north?"

"His presence would neatly fill the niches left empty by the departure of the Stained Sister and the Forsworn Healer, when combined with the Stalwart Healer's assignment," he agreed.

Replacing strong hands with weaker ones, but then if we wanted our finest fighters in Hainaut we couldn't then complain they weren't elsewhere. I sipped at my water, and a moment of silence I offered as an opportunity to speak up ensued. We were done with Named, then. Good.

"How'd the talks with the Titanomachy go?" I bluntly asked.

"Fruitfully," he replied. "A formal proposition will be made to the Grand Alliance this evening."

My brow rose.

"Good news," I said. "What are they offering?"

He met my eyes calmly and did not reply. I knew instinctively, from the start, that this wasn't the silence of someone choosing his words. I still waited.

"So it's going to be like that," I eventually said, voice gone quiet.

"You cannot have it both ways, Catherine," Hanno simply replied. "Lord Marave will soon attempt to arrange a formal meeting of the Grand Alliance, during which he and I will present the offer made by the envoys of the Titanomachy. That is all I have to say on this matter."

It was on the tip of my tongue to correct him, to say that he should be calling me *Queen Catherine* then, but I mastered my temper. I would not further salt these fields out of petty spite. I breathed out, studying him. I felt, I'd admit it, a tinge of sadness over this. We'd been friends, in our own way. It had been a friendship with many boundaries, but a friendship nonetheless. Perhaps we might be that again, someday, but even if we were it wouldn't be the same. I looked for an echo of the same thing in him but found only a tranquillity that now seemed... cool. Distant.

Perhaps it always had been, I thought, and I'd just been too busy staring at my reflection in the pond to notice.

"Then we're done talking," I said. "I will see you when the proposal is made, White Knight."

For a moment I thought he might speak, but instead he nodded.

I had neither the words nor the right to change his mind, and so I simply left.

—

The message came within moment of my having returned to my quarters, and I wasted no time agreeing to the time suggested – a little after supper, this very night. A note from Vivienne was awaiting me also, as it happened. Her people in the Arsenal staff had seen Lord Yannu and the First Prince having a private meeting that began not long after my own with Hanno. The Levantine lord made no such effort with me, I could not help but note, and somehow I doubted it was because he'd expected the White Knight would fill me in. Hanno had, after all, taken pains to make it understood that he would not meddle in the political affairs of the Grand Alliance.

Was Marave showing goodwill to the First Prince, to make up for the times we'd made common front to leverage her? Callow had common interests with the Dominion, it was true, but my kingdom was far and Procer was close. *Careful Yannu* might simply be living up to his name once more, hedging the Dominion's bets when it came to its alliances. It was unpleasant to be the one left out of the loop this time, but I would take it as a helpful reminder that my influence within the Grand Alliance was not something everyone enjoyed. I'd concentrated a lot of power in my hands by virtue of being both Queen of Callow and representative for villains, and while no one was trying to replace me that didn't mean no measures would ever be taken to check me.

The council came quickly, and after an afternoon's worth of anticipation I found the proceedings rather anticlimactic. The White Knight standing as witness, Lord Yannu brought out written transcriptions of the proposal made by Ykines Silver-on-Clouds on behalf of the Titanomachy. The goods offered were well worth a second look, I silently admitted to myself. Two hundred wardstones, around a hundred artefacts suited for fighting and the temporary services of ten artisans from the Reticent Fidelity – a Chorus whose preoccupation was such artefacts, and whose members were some of the most frequent traders of their kind with Levant – to adjust them before they were used, as well as lend their expertise on the fronts so long as it did not involve combat.

In 'exchange', the Gigantes required two of their spellsingers – whose identity had yet to be determined – to have full access to the Arsenal, its resources and all its public projects. They also wanted formal recognition by the Grand Alliance of their people's right to use the Twilight Ways.

Tempting as the artefacts were, I was honestly inclined to hold out for better terms given what was being asked of us. The Arsenal had cost a fortune to make and carried the research of some of the finest minds on Calernia: we ought to ask for more than trinkets if we were to share it with the Titanomachy. Then Lord Yannu put the final part of the offer on the table, and I was glad to have held my tongue.

"The Titanomachy acknowledges the threat of the Dead King's rising," Lord Marave said, "and though they will not make war at the side of Procer, they offer instead a gift: a great warding, raised along the shores of the Tomb, that will turn away the dead."

I saw the hunger in Hasenbach's eyes at the words and knew the giants had us. I set aside the strategic implications of such a gift, instead wondering that the Gigantes knew to make it at all. It was not yet common knowledge that we were to have an offensive in Hainaut. I eyed the White Knight and the Lord of Alava, wondering how much they'd told the giants, before admitting to myself it didn't matter. The Gigantes might have made the offer meaning to begin the work in Cleves, where the shores were somewhat secure, and going east along the water with our armies in support. Besides, even if it turned out these two had been overly chatty the results they brought more than justified it.

It was tempting. Gods, but it was damned tempting. If we took back Hainaut all the way to the shore and behind that wave the Gigantes came in to raise wards rivalling the quality of those beneath the Red Snake Wall, the nature of this war would change. The heavily fortified Lycaonese lands would become the main path of invasion for Keter, and the lakeside fronts would stabilize almost overnight. Enough that it might be possible for us to take a stab at the Crown of the Dead itself, should Masego come through with Quartered Seasons.

"Gigantes do not bargain," the White Knight told us. "This is the only offer there will be, and I ask you consider it seriously."

Hasenbach thanked him, and it was agreed that we would reconvene tomorrow after having 'considered' matters, but everyone in the room knew how this was going to end. It was just a matter of how long we'd delay before accepting so we wouldn't be looking too desperate.

—

There were still a few days left to my stay in the Arsenal, but it was swiftly coming to an end.

As soon as the treaty with the Gigantes was wrapped up and my own few affairs settled, I'd be returning to Hainaut to begin arranging the campaign from there. Indrani would be coming with

me, and perhaps eventually Masego as well – it depended on how the Quartered Seasons project was looking – but there were others I would be leaving behind. I was looking at one that'd sting the most, once more settled in the same old infirmary seat that'd become as a second bed for me. The only sign that Hakram was healing was that the healing mages had removed the breathing spell, trusting his lungs to carry him without the help now. Otherwise, his sleeping form had not changed.

"I'm going to have leave you behind," I quietly said. "'Drani's right. I could stretch out my stay by doing some planning from here, but it'd just be delaying the inevitable."

It still sickened me to think that I'd be abandoning him to this little bed in this little room, when the only reason he was wounded at all was that he'd fought for me. A knock on the door jolted me out of my thoughts, though it also irked me more than a little. I'd instructed my people not to disturb me.

"Come in," I said, tone forcefully even.

I'd give whoever had the come the benefit of the doubt, if they were willing to interrupt against my clear instructions. It was not some nervous messenger who came in, though, but Vivienne Dartwick. I immediately bit down on the sharp words already on the tip of my tongue. Vivienne did not look nervous, not exactly. It'd take more than our current disagreements to make a woman who'd faced down a Princess of Summer feel nervous. But she did look... cautious. Hesitant. And she'd noticeably dressed down.

In Salia she'd gotten into the habit of wearing nice dresses. Nothing extravagant – she was Callowan, and we were at war – but there'd been a distinct noble tinge to it. It made sense. Her father had been a noble, if one stripped of his lands after the Conquest, and she must have worn clothes not unlike those when she'd been younger. I'd never occurred to me how different it made her look until just now, when I saw her for the first time in ages in something closer to the leathers she'd worn as the Thief. There were still skirts and leggings beneath the long shirt, but this was a notable departure from usual.

"Cat," she greeted me. "Do you have a moment?"

She had a bottle in hand, I noted. The glass was of poor quality, so it was probably Callowan. Vale summer wine? She'd come prepared. Or trying to bribe me, like I was a drunk that could be bought with a favourite poison.

"I asked for-" I began, and saw something in her face close.

I bit down on the sentence. The hesitance, the dressing down, the wine. Gods but she was trying, wasn't she? When it wasn't even her fault. And there was something about the change clothes that

left me a sour taste in the mouth. It felt a little like abasement, and I did not like what it said about either of us that she'd thought it might work. Poor timing was no reason to bite her head off.

"Never mind," I said. "Come in, close the door behind you."

She nodded, but the wariness did not leave. She looked a little at a loss as to what she should say, even as she sat down at my side in the same chair Indrani usually did.

"I was saying my goodbyes," I told her. "Or maybe warning him they were coming, I suppose."

I wasn't going to leave tomorrow, after all, even if the date was not far in the future either.

"I still can't believe he was wounded this badly," she admitted. "He was never our finest fighter, but he always seemed so... solid."

I grunted in agreement.

"Nobody's solid against demons," I said. "At least the Mirror Knight cut him before the taint could spread."

Otherwise... I thought of Nephele's pleading eyes, and my staff coming down. I closed my eyes for a moment and breathed steadily, in and out, until the cold fear that'd seized me ebbed low. Gods. Even just the *thought* of having to do the same to Hakram...

"It's been a long few years, hasn't it?" Vivienne said, tone almost thoughtful.

She was looking at me with an expression that was hard to read. My jaw clenched in embarrassment.

"For everyone," I said.

"For you more than me," she said. "We're both tired, Cat, but it's a different kind of tired."

"A hollow excuse," I said.

The heights where I now stood had been reached through a pile of corpses. I would not spit on those deaths by moaning about the *burdens of authority*. Vivienne said nothing for some time. It did not mind, though the silence was not exactly comfortable.

"I have been putting together a census of Callow," she suddenly said.

My brow rose in surprise. I'd not actually heard about that.

"The Fairfaxes only held them infrequently and by unreliable methods, but under the Carrion Lord the Empire gathered a great deal of trustworthy information," Vivienne continued.

Black had probably been most interested in population numbers and what the local trades were, I thought, since that information would allow him to follow the flow of coin. Lack of gold where there should be plenty would have told him which nobles were trying to raise troops to rebel.

"What do you intend to do with it?" I asked.

"I want to fund workshops and guilds to foster certain trades," she said. "We have the materials to make dyes and the manners of cloths that have enriched Mercantis. Royal coin could help our people enter the trade. And we could organize much, through guilds: the lumber from Holden and what was once Liesse would be worth a fortune out east, where they so sorely lack it. Trading cattle with the Clans upriver for amber and fur would not only enrich us, it would give the orcs a reason never to resume raiding."

"You need peace for that," I gently reminded her.

For there to be any trade with the east, to have the coin to make any of this at all.

"I know," she assured me. "I really do. I understand that the war with the Dead King is what matters right now."

She met my eyes, the blue-grey of them grown pale under the glow of the magelights.

"But I need you to know that I won't be a... parasite," she said. "I won't just coast to the throne on your reputation and then do *nothing* with this. You put trust in me, Cat. And I know some of it is because I learned to see what you see – how much more we could be, if we stop seeing greenskins as the enemy – but I want to believe you saw in me the makings of a good queen."

Her voice had grown raw. I held my breath, somehow afraid it would be enough to interrupt.

"I want to live up to it," Vivienne said, eyes gone hard as stone. "I *will* live up to it."

Slowly, I breathed out. She did not speak a word more, only searching my face with something like desperation.

"I know," I quietly said. "I never saw you as a..."

I did not stay *parasite*, though the word echoed in the silence anyway. I passed a hand through my hair, mulling over my words. However inarticulate my first words had been, I saw on Vivienne's

face they had at least taken the edge off of the apprehension. With clumsy hands I ended up reaching for my pipe, that old gift from Masego that had become so dear to me, and filled it. Moments later, a touch of Night was enough for me to breathe out a long stream of wakeleaf. Vivienne had been patient, and so I talked.

"I believe you'll be a good queen," I said. "I genuinely do. And while I have been an able warlord, I don't think the talents that helped me there would suit peace times."

I'd grown too used to having my orders obeyed without questioning. I'd grown too used to resorting to violence to get my way, to schemes and assassinations and all the bastard ways to see your will done. Those methods had their place for any queen, but they'd come to be just a little too close to my hand. Too easily grasped. I liked to think I had done the best I could for my people, but I would not deny I had done it as a tyrant. Vivienne was not weak, but even as a heroine she'd disliked killing. It would not be her first resort. And the plans she was already making only reinforced my belief I'd made the right choice of successor.

"That's part of what makes me angry, I think," I admitted. "I know my name will make it onto the pages of history books, Vivienne. But back home, I can't help but suspect I'll be remembered as the dark days before you took up the crown."

I smiled, a tad bitterly.

"Necessary days, most will agree," I murmured. "They were savage times and so Callow required a savage queen. But we were well rid of them and her, afterwards, so that a more enlightened era might take their place."

That enlightened era, I thought, was sitting next to me with something like grief on her face.

"It won't be like that," Vivienne fiercely said. "You know I wouldn't let them..."

I took her hand for a moment, clenched it in a gesture too hard to be gratitude but too grateful to be anger.

"I can already see the current," I gently told her. "And its inevitable end."

It wasn't without reason it was happening. This had not sprouted from thin air as if by divine intervention. Deciding to keep Akua in my service had cost me much esteem among even my most loyal, and back home sending Callowans to die on foreign fields against the Dead King had become increasingly unpopular as the soldiers stayed abroad and the taxes stayed high. I wouldn't face revolt over this, I suspected at least in part because anyone who

might feasibly lead one was either dead or part of my armies. But I'd turned Callow into a cradle of armies, and only that. My only legacy among my people would be the victories and defeat I had led my soldiers through.

It was not an enjoyable thought.

"Archer chewed me out," I admitted, "in that way she does when she pretends it's not what she's doing."

"Because Indrani is much too tough and aloof to care about it when her friends quarrel, naturally," Vivienne amusedly said. "It would be beneath her to ever meddle in such things."

I grinned, though it faded after a moment.

"She was right, though," I said, "when she castigated me for clutching to my pride when I like to claim I have none. I've said for years I was ready to abdicate, Vivienne, and I thought I meant it. But then I had to deal with genuinely sharing power – not just delegating it – and it got stuck in my throat. It matters more to me than I like to admit, the authority."

"It's all right, you know," she said. "To be hurt that after all you've sacrificed, the gratitude passed so quickly."

I breathed in sharply. That was perhaps, I thought, the closest anyone had come to actually reading me right when it came to this.

"Maybe it is," I said. "But all these years, I've always told myself I was taking that next step because it needed to be done. That I'd surrender it all the moment I was no longer necessary. And maybe that's half a lie, always was."

The words came out in a stumble, perhaps more honest than I would have liked.

"But I'd like to live up to it, Vivienne," I softly said. "I'd like to be the kind of woman who genuinely believes that."

I gathered myself, after a moment.

"I'm sorry I took it out on you," I said. "It's not your fault, and it was ill-done of me."

"I'm sorry too," Vivienne replied. "For what this will do to you, before it's all over."

A knot I'd not known was in my shoulders loosened. I smiled, and she smiled back. Sometimes, I thought, the things that mattered could still be fixed. Sometimes you got to them in time. A hoarse breath sounded, which I realized a heartbeat later that was neither mine nor Vivienne's. I hurriedly rose to my feet, wincing

in pain at my bad knee, and arrived just in time to see Hakram's eyes flutter open.

"Cat?" he groaned.

"I'm here," I told him.

It'd been a hard few years, there was no denying that.

But sometimes, just sometimes, we got lucky.

Interlude: Ebb

"The highest form of victory is not mere triumph over another, but to use such a triumph as the foundation of your own. This way superiority is demonstrated not only over one defeated but also one victorious, proving your own cunning to be beyond both."

– Extract from 'The Behaviours of Civil Conduct', by High Lady Mchumba Sahelian

There were some who called Mauricius indolent but he preferred think of himself as patient.

The expensive chilled wine – genuine Baalite red, not the imitation the Ashuran brewed on this side of the sea – before him slowly warmed, the coating of frost on the goblet slowly dripping down onto the table. He had yet to touch it. His eyes remained on the lights of the city instead, on the warm glow that set jewels to the dark and the heartbreakingly beautiful mosaics of the Irenian Plaza displayed below the hidden balcony. It was a common tale in Mercantis that Aeolian himself, the famous Tormented Painter, had died moments after putting the last touches of colour on the work. Mauricius knew the truth behind the unspoken boast, for he'd cared to learn it.

Aeolian had been eighty-three and dying when he'd begun the work, debt-ridden to the extent that he'd been willing to spend even his last days on the mosaics if it meant his children would not inherit the crushing burden of his lifetime of indulgences. Yet the City of Bought and Sold preferred the shorter tale, the one that claimed to own a work so beautiful it had taken the life of a Named to make it. It made the mosaics no fairer to behold, Mauricius thought. They were, regardless, a wonder of this world: moving with hour and sun, a living story of interwoven sorcery and skill. But buying the life of a Named spoke of power, and for the merchant lords of this city there was nothing more intoxicating than that.

Mauricius ought to know, as the eldest of the living merchant lords.

Behind him, past the sculpted marble arch bearing a discreet muting enchantment, the shadowy silhouette of a waiting attendant stood still. The service in Sub Rosa was second to none, even in this island where every delight could be bought, though the truth was that Mauricius had taken a balcony tonight largely for the view. Few people even knew that this place existed, hidden behind wards and secrecy as it was, and most believed the Irenian Plaza to be entirely surrounded by the three edifices that were the heart of the Consortium's power in this material world.

The Forty-Stole Court, the Guild Exchange and the Princely Palace.

Power, wealth and influence – all nestled closely together like chicks gathering for warmth. Knowing what was to happen tonight, Mauricius had thought it fitting that he should be close to the beating heart of Mercantis. Two men were to die tonight, after all. The merchant lord slid a finger along the rim of his goblet, watching as beads of condensation slid down the sinuous length of silver. Even now, in manses across the city, his fellows would be scheming behind closed doors. Dear Livia's return from this *Arsenal* bearing the answer of the Grand Alliance had thrown the Consortium into disorder.

Several of the most influential among them had voiced a belief it was treason for Ambassador Livia Murena to have agreed to such unfavourable terms when half the City knew that the Principate was so deeply in their debt it couldn't even see daylight. It was said that there'd been foul play. Given that Livia had not let her wife out of her sight since returning to the city, Mauricius believed there might be a thread of truth there. Not that the opposition cared. The Consortium buried bleeding hearts long before they might rise to a position where their words might matter, but there were some who objected to fleecing the Grand Alliance on more practical grounds.

If the Dead King won, they first said, we would rue our schemes. That found little purchase, for this was not the first crusade to struggle against the undead. Always these ended in bloody sacrifice and the resumption of the ancient stalemate, as the aftermath decided which among the living nations had been the winners and the losers of this particular iteration. Yet when it had been argued that in the aftermath of the Grand Alliance's victory a burning gaze might be turned to Mercantis, more had bought into the argument. Cordelia Hasenbach was a civilized woman, and her anger could have been appeased should it prove lasting, but it was not so with her allies.

The Dominion was a pack of savages that killed each other on a whim, and Callow was a cauldron of long hatreds. There was a reason that the Consortium had never tried to seize Callowan lands, though it had often had the strength to do so and feasibly

keep them. The scheme of taking Dormer and adding it to the holdings of the City had long been discussed, but never once undertaken. The lesson had been learned well from the Brief War, when Atalante had tried to annex part of the Callowan south after buying passage for its war fleet from the Consortium. Jehan the Wise had butchered the invaders, which had not been unexpected, but he'd then began to raise ships for a retaliatory attack on Mercantis itself. Which had been.

Embassies of the Merchant Princess Clarissa had made it known that the City was not involved in the invasion beyond having sold passage through its waters, but the Callowans hadn't *cared*. When Daoine ships bearing soldiers of the Watch began docking in Dormer, Clarissa had realized that the Callowans would go through with an invasion even if they were likely to lose, even if the mere undertaking of it would bankrupt them for a generation. She'd emptied the coffers of Mercantis appeasing the king of Callow, and no merchant lord had ever seriously talked of taking Callowan land again. Jehan the Wise had been a Named of heroic bent, the practical sorts were now eager to remind the City.

The Black Queen was a monster that gave even the Wasteland pause, and the Consortium wanted to *extort* her?

Mauricius had been privately amused by that rejoinder, for the Black Queen did not truly give the Wasteland pause in the slightest. Some days he wondered if anything ever did. Poor Fabianus had been stuck in the middle of it and lost what few feathers he'd still had. Their Merchant Prince was first tricked into keeping the First Prince's secrets, and then was pushed so strongly to reveal them that he'd preferred to recuse himself of such matters entirely than continue to be involved. Given that Fabianus' office held little direct power but a great deal of influence, that decision had practically ended his reign in every real sense.

Mauricius smiled and looked at the shadowed mosaics down below. A decade ago, most of the city had thought him the strongest contender for that very same office. He was among the wealthiest few – trading arms in the Free Cities was ever a tidy profit – of the Consortium, he'd served in the Forty-Stole Court for over a decade and save for that little offence when he'd had his first wife's lover and the man's entire family sold into slavery, there were no black marks on his record.

He'd made sure they all ended up in Stygia, so that they were actually slaves even in the legal sense. He was not a forgiving man, and preferred his revenges to be of the through kind.

Though Mauricius was reputed to be somewhat indolent, back then that'd been in his favour. No one in the Consortium wanted too motivated or skillful a prince lest the days of the Caepio, who had ruled as kings in all but name, return. He'd campaigned for

the office, of course. Sunk a fortune into buying the love of the streets, the votes of the Lesser Courts. But he'd not fought for the support of other merchant lords. *Indolent*, his supporters had mourned in the years that followed. After Fabianus was elected the office. None of them ever learned that he'd never sought the title at all: while most saw the elections as a gaping pit for coin, he'd been after a profit. Mauricius had required twice as much as he'd invested in the election as a bribe, to let Fabianus win.

He'd kept a single gold coin from that bribe, as a sentimental token, and as the lights of Mercantis shone in the distance the merchant lord took it out of his robes and idly toyed with it. The luster of it brought out a hunger he knew would never be entirely sated, but Mauricius was a patient man. He'd learned as a boy that the patient always got their day, if they picked the right opportunities. And what was this era of chaos, if not a great banquet of opportunities? The Consortium was fighting itself, the recklessly hungry and the cravenly cautious at odds in the markets and the courts. Praesi gold set tongues wagging, or silenced them, while the long shadow of the Grand Alliance blotted out old certainties.

Mauricius had taken the Dread Empress' bribes, of course. And he'd listened to the honeyed words of her envoys, to the schemes she wove even here in the City. He was not in the habit of refusing coin, though her plots he'd been lukewarm to. At least until it had all unfolded exactly as she had predicted: dear Livia scared into a barely acceptable settlement, a band of Named coming to keep the City under the boot and the armies of the Grand Alliance charging into Hainaut. Far away, and soon to be bloodied. All the while Consortium had turned on itself in bitter infighting, needing the guidance that its Merchant Prince had surrendered the right to provide. And so Mauricius had agreed to the plot, seeing the need for it.

In the distance, what he had been waiting for all night finally appeared: a red light blinked into existence atop a tall tower, for three heartbeats before disappearing.

Merchant Prince Fabianus was dead.

Indolent, patient, Mauricius waited. It was the better part of an hour before a messenger for the Forty-Stole Court found him. Fabianus was dead, he was told, and elections would need to be had. An emergency session of the Forty-Stole Court was to be held soon. And still Mauricius waited. It was almost another hour before he was presented with a second cup of chilled wine, and only then did the merchant lord smile.

"Thank you," he told the shadowy servant.

Prosperus Soranus was dead. That was what the cup had told him. And with him gone, Dread Empress Malicia had lost her puppet candidate to the office of Merchant Prince. All that gold she'd sunk into preparing his election would be gone unless she found another flagbearer for her interests. And even if she tried, that candidate might just lose to Mauricius should he try his hand at being elected. The Empress would suspect his hand at work, but she was a practical woman in her own way.

More gold was coming his way, and soon.

Merchant Prince Mauricius would walk the line, prevent debts being called in early but refuse to extend 'dangerous' loans. Negotiations would be opened again, seeking better terms. Malicia would get what she wanted, a Mercantis unwilling to meekly serve as the coin purse of the Grand Alliance, and the Grand Alliance would be pleased by the rise of a Merchant Prince willing to actively steer policy to their advantage if certain terms were met. There was wealth to be made, standing between the Tower and the West, and even more between the West and annihilation. Mauricius slowly rose to his feet, finally ready to attend the emergency session of the Forty-Stole Court. He was eighty-three, today, and so when he looked down at the mosaics of the Irenian Plaza it was with something like understanding.

"You'd understand, wouldn't you?" Mauricius mused. "You died clutching your brush, after all."

—

Leo had been raised to revile the name of Hypathia Trakas.

His mother had hated it before him and her father before that, a chain going back all the way to the first Trakas to have inherited a mutilated throne after Basilea Hypathia lost the ancient rights of their line. *There was a time*, Mother had taught him as a child, *where we shared power over Nicae with none*. In those days the Trakas had ruled as kings, titling themselves Basileus not out of humility but as a means to claim descent from the legendary emperor Aenos Basileon – and so primacy over all other crowns come from the collapse of his ancient empire. But Hypathia Trakas had been arrogant, and unwise. She had made such disaster of the Second Samite war that a swaggering thug of an admiral had been able to carve her throne in two: thereafter, there would be a Strategos as well as a Basileus.

Yet the truth was that, for all the bile that Mother had passed onto him, neither of them had truly expected that they would be able to right this ancient wrong in their lifetimes. They had been taught the dominance of their enemies when Leo's own father went to sea and never returned, taken by 'Stygian pirates' on one of the safest stretches of water of the Gulf. Father had been of a military line, an old one and more importantly one foe to

Strategos Nereida Silantis. The warning was heard clearly, and the alliances carefully sealed by Mother withered on the vine. The Trakas had tradition on their side, hallowed blood and the sacred duties only an anointed Basileus could undertake. They even had deep influence in matters of stewardship.

Yet the Strategoi had swords, and without those what was the rest worth?

Leo Trakas had been fresh to the throne when the war with Stygia and Helike erupted, though of course it was not so simple as that. In private the war had been a cause for despair, for when steel was out the Strategoi had excuses to meddle in every matter be they high or low. Leo's palace would be filled with spies, appointments stripped away and granted instead to supporters of Strategos Nereida and the treasury of the office of Basileus plundered at will for *war funds*. Silanis had even developed ties to the First Prince of Procer, who now showered her with silver and soldiers even as the latest Theodosian madman set the Free Cities aflame. The years ahead looked grim.

And then the armies of Helike and Stygia encamped beyond the walls of Nicae, and Leo realized he'd underestimated the threat of the enemy being fought. Penthes had collapsed into civil war, Atalante outright capitulated and Delos so badly mauled it was good as out of the war. Bellerophon was busy somehow failing to invade the territories of a city at war with itself, as was the wont of the People, but that was hardly a relief. Nicae stood alone, and in the streets the people were *afraid*. Even the arrival of a band of heroes – and Leo would not soon forget they had gone to Nereida, not him, even though the Trakas stood closest to the Heavens by Nicean law – had done little to improve the mood.

This was no danger to Leo Trakas, for his strengths were not the kind that could be unmade by the displeasure of the people. His blood was in his veins, his authorities writ into immutable law. It was not so with Strategos Nereida Silanis, whose authority came from the sword but also from the love of the people. Strategoi hated by the commons had a tendency to take sick and die, so that the old families might elect a more suitable replacement in their stead. And so Leo Trakas sent what few servants were still solely his to whisper in the right ears, to wonder if once-bold Nereida had not gone craven in her old age. The whispers took, for Nicae's strength had stayed behind its walls during the war, and when the enemies assaulted the wall the Strategos fought in the ranks.

It amused Leo Trakas a great deal, in private, that though he had paid a man to kill her during the battle the assassin died to a stray arrow and the Strategos was still killed by a Helikean blade.

Leo surrendered to the Tyrant of Helike himself, the red-eyed monster humming and grinning like a lunatic all the while before offering terms that were highly generous: the only concession required of Nicae would be its vote in the election of some nobody Bellerophon diplomat to the office of Hierarch of the Free Cities. Unearned as the acclaim was, the city thrummed with praised for his 'having tricked' the Tyrant into gaining nothing of worth from Nicae for his victory. And so when the opportunity had come, when the old families had come to him and asked for him to officiate over the ceremonial council that would elect the next Strategos, he'd done what every Trakas since Hypathia's own daughter had craved like a drowning soul craves air.

"No," Leo Trakas had smiled, savouring the word like fine wine.

They cajoled and whispered sweet promises, at first. And when that failed, oh but how they raged and threatened. Yet it was all but air, for Leo was beloved of the streets – fickle as they were – and they were not. To Nicae, it was a Strategos that had made a disaster of this war. They were not clamouring for another, not yet. And Leo Trakas intended on having seized power properly, by the time it occurred to them that they might want to. At first he courted the First Prince's support, for Cordelia Hasenbach had wasted no time in initiating correspondence, but when he saw the wind turn against Procer in the councils of Kairos Theododian's puppet Hierarch he leaned into it.

There was nothing the people of Nicae loved more than a good settling of scores with the Thalassocracy, and such a war would put him at odds with Procer regardless. That lion was getting old anyway, he'd heard: there were rumours of the Dead King raiding to the north, even as Praesi and Callowans smashed Proceran armies left and right. The League of Free Cities was riding high, in contrast, and Theodosian was a madman but he was a *successful* one. He was also not as wary of his 'allies' as he should perhaps be, for when Leo began reaching out to the other cities for alliances he found more takers than he had expected. Basileus Leo Trakas had already restored the old powers of his blood, but still he hungered for more.

Was his line not descended from Aenos Basileon himself, who had ruled over the great cities that did not yet call themselves free? There were none more fitting than Leo to rise to prominence in the League, to replace Helike and its twitching goblin of a king as the power behind their simpleton Hierarch. Gods, but in those heady days he'd come so very close to getting all he wanted. How had it all gone so wrong?

"The rioters have seized the amphitheatre, my lord Basileus," Captain Attika told him.

Leo looked down at the kneeling captain of his guard, letting the calm on her face settle his own unease. The game was not yet over, he told himself.

"Better that than the treasury," the Basileus finally said. "Have the Valeides and the Petros answered my messengers?"

"They have not, my lord," Captain Attika admitted.

It was a grim tidings, when even his closest allies within the old families were not willing to consider lending soldiers to keep order in the streets – or at least prevent looting of the granaries and the island-gardens. Most of Leo's soldiers were bound to guard the palace and the treasury, which limited his ability to enforce peace in the streets.

"Two days," Leo said. "In two days we will receive the Stygian grain and the dole will appease the people. We only need to hold for that long, Attika."

His captain grimaced.

"I fear that the riots might be as much from the northern news as the rationing, my lord," she admitted. "And Stygian grain cannot mend such accusations."

"Hasenbach," the Basileus hissed. "Her work, this. None of the others have the subtlety for it."

When the threat had first come through the Grand Alliance – that band of robbers – that Leo might be named a *friend of the Dead King* if he did not surrender and come to terms with 'Strategos' Zenobia, he'd laughed at the letter. Procer was too busy warring against the dead to meddle in the south, and the Black Queen had proved a rather distant patron to General Basilia. As for the Dominion it was a pack of squabbling tribes that the only civilized lot among them, the Isbili of Levante, had little control over. They couldn't agree on the colour of tablecloths without honour duel, much less genuine diplomatic policy.

There was a lot less to laugh about now that word of the condemnation had been smuggled into the city and riots shook the streets. Zenobia Vasilakis might be a mere country landowner, well beneath any of the old families that tended to claim the office of Strategos, but she had partisans anyway. Though with no real ties to the ruling naval elite of Nicae, the Vasilakis family did have a record of meritorious service in the army – which had often been neglected in favour of the fleet, over the years. Army folk kept tight loyalties, which was half the reason Leo's own mother had taken a husband from one such family.

The Vasilakis reputation had won Zenobia sympathies, even before the Grand Alliance's official recognition of her as the

legitimate ruler of Nicae cemented her status. Leo's attempts to present her to the old families as a country agitator out to replace the influential lines from the city had been largely successful, but after such honours from great crowns it wouldn't matter. Grand Alliance backing made them as powerful as any of them, in practice, and ties to General Basilia's Helike only added bite to her candidature. Zenobia had not been elected under the proper ceremony, which would have required Leo to officiate, but fewer people cared every week.

"I cannot speak to that, my lord," Captain Attika said, "but I will say that should we lose the grain to rioters, it will deal your reign a great blow. I wager they will call it Zenobia's dole instead, and the streets will sing her name."

"The docks are also guarded by our... friends," the Basileus said. "They would not hesitate to disperse riots."

The thrice-cursed Dread Empress of Praes had massacred and stolen his fleet in the same stroke, but there was nothing Leo could do about that. What he *could* do was trade the Praesi access to the port for repairs of the ships in exchange for them funding Stygian grain shipments and providing the coin that let him keep paying his army even after the collapse of trade in the Samite Gulf. If Ashur weren't fighting a very polite civil war with itself Leo might have been afraid of reprisals for the sacks of Smyrna and Arwad he'd ordered, but until the Thalassocracy dealt with its succession crisis Nicae would remain safe.

"I fear that would only incite further unrest, my lord," Captain Attika said. "Would the sight of the dead slaying the living not seem to put truth to the accusations of the Grand Alliance?"

Leo's fingers clenched. He'd not considered that. Any thinking man would grasp that the Dead King fielded no armies this far south, but angry mobs were not renowned for their wisdom. No doubt his enemies would seize on the opportunity presented regardless of the truth, too.

"Then we must secure the docks with our own men," Leo reluctantly said. "All is lost, without the grain."

He peered at his kneeling captain.

"Where would you suggest the men be taken from?" he said.

She hesitated for a moment.

"The palace," Captain Attika finally said. "It is much easier to defend, and less likely to be attacked. Greed will lead rioters to try their hand at the treasury sooner or later, my lord."

"Agreed," the Basileus said.

Or rivals from old families under the guise of rioters, even. None of that lot was above plundering the coffers of the state to fill their own.

"See to it, Captain Attika," he ordered.

"My lord," she replied, saluting.

After the door closed behind her, Leo Trakas sat alone on the throne he'd been the first of his line to ever fully reclaim. And still the thought niggled away at him – would the Trakas of days yet to come name him as another Hypathia, another fool who'd wasted the gifts of fate? The long tapestries and slender columns around him gave no answer to his musings. No, Leo told himself. The game was not yet over, and this could yet be salvaged. Once the grain ships had come many of the rioters would disperse and he could finally suppress the riots. After he regained control of the city, he could come to terms with 'Strategos' Zenobia.

To his knowledge she was still unmarried, if a decade older than him, and perhaps the surrender being forced on him could be turned into a marriage alliance instead. He doubted Zenobia was any more eager to be under the Grand Alliance's thumb than he was to be under Malicia's. A united Nicae would be able to force Helike to end its incessant war-making, especially if it clasped hands with Stygia, and Leo could count his debts to the Tower settled if he made that savage Basilia cease attacking the reign of Malicia's Penthesian puppet Exarch. Perhaps sending for a painting of Zenobia was in order, he thought, so that he might have a notion of what he'd be in for.

With Captain Attika gone he'd expected servants to begin attending him again, but the hall was instead eerily silent. Leo frowned. Was something wrong, or did someone simply need to be switched? The Basileus became uncomfortably aware that his regal clothes came without a weapon, or more protection than a few layers of cloth could afford him. There were armoured statues here in the hall, though, bearing the gilded armour of his forbears and matching ceremonial blades. Yet if he were to leave here having strapped on such a sword and there'd been no trouble, if servants saw him... Laughter was the death of fear, and much of his reign now depended on fear.

Silence lingered throughout his thoughts, and that as much as anything else made the decision for him.

The blade of Basilea Sousanna Trakas came clear of the scabbard with a hiss. It fit his hand well, as Sousanna had been tall for a woman. As he recalled she was best known for her victories against encroaching Stygia and having extracted tribute from the hill tribes later to become Helike, so at least half of the old use might see the light of day again. Sure-footed even if it had been years since he'd last held a blade, Leo pushed open the

great gates of the throne hall and slipped into the corridor beyond. Still not a soul in sight, he saw with dismay. That was not natural.

Had his own servants begun to flee the palace, abandoning his cause?

More worryingly, there was no trace of his personal guard. There should have been four in the corridor, awaiting his orders, but instead only further silence awaited. Leo decided to head for his quarters in the deeper palace, where more guards should be awaiting him. Tense moments walking through deserted hallways came at an end when he found the butchered corpse of one of his soldiers on the floor. Stabbed in the back, he found, and the body was still warm. It was a coup, must be, and by heading to his quarters he'd be putting himself into the hands of his enemies.

He must turn back now, find the barracks and convince soldiers to escort him to the manse of an allied family. The Valeides might have denied him more men, but they could not refuse him shelter without dishonouring themselves: his father had been brother to their patriarch's wife. Discarding the last pretence of being in control, Leo ran for it.

He heard it as a whistle first. A the tune of a half-familiar song, though he could not remember the name of it. The Basileus abandoned the corridor it came from, banking left to shake whoever was whistling. Except the same slow, mournful whistle awaited him there. Dead end after dead end, until he began to hear the words.

*Did we not lose,
A hundred times?
Did we not win,
A hundred times?*

His blood ran cold. And as the snare tightened around him, Leo Trakas ran until there was nowhere left to run. Cornered in his own palace, surrounded by tapestries speaking to old glories as slowly the sound of hooves on stone came closer. The scent of blood was in the air. Back to a splash of blood-red silk, a golden sword in hand, the Basileus of Nicae stood his ground as rider came into the flickering torchlight. Her voice was clear, strong.

"For we did lose,
A hundred times," General Basilia sang, a sharp smile on her face.

Her sword was already in her hand, dripping red on the stone. Behind her, a pack of riders followed her into the corridor –

red-handed savages, defiling a palace older than their entire misbegotten city.

"And we will win,
A hundred times," General Basilia sang, the smile fading from her lips and sinking into her eyes.

She leaned forward on her saddle.

"You warned of me consequences once, Leo Trakas. Shall we now finish our talk?"

The Basileus of Nicae spat to the side, defiant.

"Once a hound, always a hound," Leo said. "You will fail your new masters, just as you failed your last."

"Where was that spirit," General Basilia laughed, "a year ago?"

Her blade rose, and so did his. She spurred her mount and he ran forward, ran and yelled until the horse was past him and he felt a flash of heat across his chest and face. Blood, he found as he stumbled onto the tapestries.

"'till falls the age,
And end the times," the general softly said.

Darkness came. And just before it, dread. Gods, if they'd taken the city – the undead the Tower had left, would they not burn the city as they fled? Malicia would not suffer the port to stand, if she could not use it.

Leo Trakas' last word was a rasping gurgle as he tried too late to speak a warning.

Chapter 44: Cliff

*"I am only seen when blind
And dawn always kills me
My omens can be divined
But my gifts are all empty."
– Taghreb riddle*

Neustal had been little more than a tower by the road, once upon a time.

It had since become the end of the grounds held by the living in the war for Hainaut, that little crumbling watchtower raised into a stout keep by the sappers of the Army of Callow. From it the fortifications of the Grand Alliance spread out like spiderweb, filled with steel and people and wood. Hainaut was too large for a wall to be raised across its entire lowlands, at least by human hands, but we'd done the next best thing: a series of trenches to

defend in depth, as deep as we could dig them. The defensive line was not straight, no single stroke of the quill on a map, but instead just as chaotic as a coastline. The trenches bent and twisted to reach fortifications already standing or avoid swamps, or hard stone or hills.

Even if we'd raised a wall across all this land, we wouldn't have been able to defend it. It'd simply too long to be manned with the numbers we'd need to turn back a proper attack by the dead, our forces spread thin where Keter would concentrate as will. Instead we had the trenches and the knots, the strongholds along the line where troops were massed and kept vigilant. Patrolling along the desolate length of the trenches companies went with carts carrying along an ingenious Lycaonese invention, what they called the *holzburgen*: the parts of a small wooden fortress made easy to assemble with nothing more than nails and sweat, cleverly using the carts themselves as walls.

When too badly outnumbered by raiding undead the patrols would fort up and send up signals should scrying be scrambled, bringing in the second line of defence. Further south, along scrying relays, we had established large mobile reserves that could be mobilized without prior warning. Each counted a vanguard of horsemen and kept several mages capable of opening a gate into the Twilight Ways, which meant most of the time our people arrived in time to relieve the patrolmen. We rotated which soldiers were assigned to the reserve as well as the location of said reserves, lest the Dead King be able to map out our ability to respond to his attacks.

The reserves had been half-emptied when I'd had to hastily assemble an army to deal with the undead plague that'd emerged behind us, but they had since been filled anew. Not for long, though. We would be moving into the lands held by the dead, soon, and to get the knockout blow we wanted we would need as many soldiers as we could field. Already many were here, and the stronghold splayed out below felt like a living, breathing creature: a great beast of old with a thousand hands and feet, twisting and turning and bleeding out fires from its skin.

As the wind passed through my hair, I let the thoughts pass through me. Neustal's roof was lead, and sharply angled so that rain would slide off, but there was just enough room for someone to stand at the edge of the ledge. It'd rained the night before, and the tiles were still slippery, but my footing was sure. It was not my first time standing here.

The moon was nearly full and glaring down at us all through the cover of dark clouds, and there was a cloying humidity to the air that told me more rain was coming. It was enough to frizzle my hair as it was blown forward in strands – the wind was at my back – and have sweat bead the back of my neck. The sensation was not

unpleasant, feeling the wind flow around the Mantle of Woe as I closed my eyes and slowly breathed in and out. Try as I might, I could not reach it again: that elusive moment in the Arsenal when my Name had stirred awake, when I'd felt my hold friend bare his fangs again. I suddenly opened my eye. My ears did not tell me she was here, though they did not need to: we were bound by something altogether more intimate.

I said nothing, only taking in the sight of the dark plain and the shifting moonlight that stretched out beyond the bustling walls of the stronghold. Eerie as they were, the lowlands of Hainaut were beautiful to behold.

"It is a strange habit you've picked up of late, dear heart," Akua Sahelian said.

"Is it?" I softly laughed. "I've had stranger, I assure you."

The shade stood at my side, undaunted by the heights. They weren't something that could kill either of us, although... I put my weight in my good foot the slightest bet, felt the tile begin to slip, and my stomach tightened. And in that moment before the drop, in that instinctive fear that was ingrained in our hindbrain, I felt like I could almost touch my Name. *Almost*.

"You told me you feared heights, once," Akua said.

"I did," I acknowledged.

"Yet you confronted that fear," she said. "Mastered it."

"Mastery is a bold claim," I smiled into the dark.

I'd stood on the edge of the orphanage's roof, night after night, until I could stand through the trembling. Until I no longer felt like throwing up. And I'd beaten back the fear, eventually. And yet even after all these years, in that blind moment before the drop, still my stomach clenched. No, mastery was much too bold a claim.

"A strange habit, and a strange mood to match it," Akua softly said. "I do wonder, Catherine, what fear it is that brings you to the ledge this time?"

I did love it, against my better judgement, that sometimes she just *got it* without needing to be told a single thing. I hated it as well, of course. It was like being naked, and while I was not shy about my skin my thoughts were a different matter. I'd been warned not to let Akua in, of course. Not to let her slither into my inner circle, else I find I had made a nest of my bones for this most beautiful of snakes. It was too late for that now, though. I'd already made my choice as to how this would end, and

there would be no turning back. Too many prices had already been paid.

"I've been having this dream," I idly said, closing my eyes.

I extended my arms to the sides, like a Levantine ropewalker preparing to cross above the pit, and without a sound found that the shade had moved out of the way.

"I always stand on the edge," I said. "But it's rarely the same. Sometimes it's that roof from when I was a girl, but more often something else."

My arms had opened my cloak and so the wind traced slow fingers against the hem, setting it aflutter.

"It's been that glacier at the heart of the Fields of Wend, with the dark waters below," I said. "It's been that drop into the tunnel to Liesse, during the Doom. The walls of Keter. The end of the Laure docks, on a moonless night. There's always a drop, and darkness below."

I was awake. My eyes were closed, but I was awake.

"Then how do you know you're not asleep, right now?" she murmured into my ear.

The hair on the back of my neck raised. I smiled, slowly breathed out and opened my eyes. I leaned forward, arms still extended, and risked the edge of the ledge. My stomach clenched with that familiar streak of ice, but still there I stood.

"In the dream," I confessed, "I always fall."

My feet grew numb as lead, and down into the dark I went. And never did a scream leave my throat as I tumbled into the quiet stillness, the cool peace of utter night.

"Not tonight, then," Akua murmured.

Damn her, I fondly thought, for understanding every part of it. She was standing at my side, now that I'd brought back my arms to my chest, pretending she had never gone behind me and spoken into my ear just the way she used to when she was still but a spirit bound to the Mantle. We both knew otherwise, but we left that truth untouched.

"Not tonight," I agreed.

Tonight my feet did not slip. My leg throbbed with pain but still I looked up at the half-veiled moon, breathing out. In and out, calm. My Name did not stir, though it felt frustratingly close.

"There is a place outside the walls of Wolof," Akua eventually said, "where old stone were raised in a circle for some long-forgotten ritual. Water flows beneath the earth, so great clusters of Wasaliti lilies – purple and pale – grow there among the grass."

She looked out into the night, faintly smiling.

"When the moon is at its highest," she said, "you can lie among the lilies and grass like a bed, and the shadows they cast look like the great ribs of a giant."

I studied her for a long moment.

"It's not a place of power," I said.

"No," she quietly said. "I found it, as a child, and shared it with no one. I have not been there in many years."

A secret for a secret, I grasped. Had she known I'd spoken to no one else of the dreams, or simply suspected? No matter. A secret for a secret, I thought once more. It sounded like the way a Praesi would think of... well, that word was best left out of this. Too dangerous for all sorts of reasons, the least of which the stories it brought with it. The silence we kept clung heavy to the air, carrying with it an offer. She had made it to me before, though rarely in too explicit a manner, but it'd been a while since I'd been genuinely tempted. Killian had taught me to value trust over the press of flesh, bittersweet as the lesson had been to learn. If I turned my head to meet Akua's eyes, it would be accepting the offer. Falling off the ledge, just a little bit.

I leaned forward. The fear came, and I did not fall.

"We are who we are," I said without turning.

I was many things but a Callowan most of all, and she was the Doom of Liesse. Forgiveness was not the stuff my bones were made of, and a hundred thousand souls were still waiting for their long price.

"So we are," Akua Sahelian agreed.

Her tone I could not read. Disappointment? Frustration? Even long gone from the Wasteland, she was still a daughter from that circle of Creation's finest liars.

"Why did you come?" I asked.

Safer grounds. Like a slap on a butterfly, my words tore through the last remnants of what had been hanging in the air.

"One of the patrols came back mauled," she said.

I cocked a brow. Hardly unusual. Keter had gotten bolder in prodding out defences over the last month – the Iron Prince believed we were being tested to see if we were building up to an offensive, and I tended to agree – so it was not the first time blood ended up on the ground. We'd already begun to raise the numbers on the patrols, it was a good way to blood our conscripts before the looming battles.

"Razin Tanja was on one of them," Akua said.

Not wounded, I decided, or she would have told me immediately.

"Hard losses?" I asked.

"Near half," she said. "The dead got to them before they put together their wooden fortress."

"It shook him," I said.

"So Adjutant's watchful eyes reported," Akua agreed. "I believed it might be of interest to you."

"You were right," I said, taking a last look down.

Not tonight, I thought. There would be a night, sooner or later. Everyone got one. But it would not be tonight.

We'd see about tomorrow.

—

The Lord of Malaga was in his quarters, they told me.

We'd held Neustal long enough that what had once been a sea of tents with palisades had become closer to a fortress-camp, barracks being raised in stone and timber while smaller houses were raised in a sort of separate officer's district. In those muddy 'streets' nobles and career soldiers from places spanning half of Calernia were made to rub elbows, which had been fascinating to watch when it didn't end up involving loud arguments. It would have been an exaggeration to say that the timber house where Razin Tanja lived was part of a 'Levantine quarter' within the district, I reflected, but not a claim entirely without foundation.

For practical reasons – being able to find officers easily, ease of supply and security – we'd gone along with the natural tendency of people to stick to their own, so it was no surprise that warriors in the colours of the Binder and Slayer's Bloods were all over the street when I limped my way to Lord Razin's abode. A Binder asked me to present my wrist before I was allowed in, so that she might ascertain I truly was who I appeared to be. The Levantine mages might be rubbish at illusions, but Binders dealt with blood from the moment they began in their trade: what

flowed through my veins was proof enough of my identity, as far as they were concerned.

I was not announced in, though neither did I catch the young lord by surprise. I'd half-wondered if he would be drunk by the time I arrived, but he didn't look it – morose, sure, but then I'd be the same if I'd had to watch half my patrol get butchered by undead. He was seated and did not rise when I entered, though he offered a nod.

"Black Queen," Razin of the Binder's Blood greeted me.

"Lord Razin," I replied, brow pulling into a frown.

He was bruised on the cheek, a purple shiner crusting around the edges. It made him look younger, and more beaten down than one of the five most powerful nobles in Levant should ever feel.

"Did your watchers not mention I am unharmed?" he drily asked.

"Not wounded is what I got," I admitted without batting an eye. "Though that hit on your face will het nasty if you don't attend to it."

"It has been cleaned," he dismissed.

"You have healers," I pointed out.

And even if somehow none of the Dominions could be stirred to heal one of the head of the greatest lineages of the Blood, he could have borrowed some from another army. The aristocrat smiled bleakly at me, and I was once more reminded of how few battles he'd seen before our first meeting in Iserre. There'd been an arrogance in him then that'd been cut down to size since, I thought, though the remnants of it lingered. Funny things, people. So fragile in so many ways, and yet even the starkest of lessons found it difficult to change what lay at the heart of us. Like hardy weeds in a garden, the worst of us was often the most deeply entrenched.

"I am aware, Your Majesty," he said. "This is a choice. The bruise will fade, but the ache will be... a useful reminder."

I wanted to chide him for that indulgence, but how could I when my leg still ached from standing atop the keep? Hypocrisy and I were not unacquainted, but I tried not to seek her company. I claimed a seat at his table, since it was clear he was not going to invite me, and it was telling that a tired grunt was the most objection he was able to muster.

"What happened?" I asked.

"That poor orc you strapped to a wheelchair will have the report by now," he acidly replied.

He probably would. Hakram was doing his best to replace his missing limbs with those of a hundred busy attendants, and Hakram's best tended to see things through.

"And I'll read it," I said. "But that's not what I'm asking. What happened, Tanja?"

The young lord looked aside. Not to a window, for we had not made those – too dangerous, given the risks of infiltration – but to a tapestry-covered wall. It was a while before he answered me, voice exhausted and raw.

"We didn't see them until it was too late," the Lord of Malaga said. "The skeletons were far and slow, so we took our time. Even considered duels."

My brow rose. He knew I disapproved of those.

"My cousin Alis was with us, fresh from home," Razin said. "We were close, as children."

His fingers tightened, almost imperceptibly.

"She is also without the Talent."

A sting that'd followed him all his life, I knew, as the descendant of the most famous mage lineage in Levant. Blood were raised to try to emulate their ancestors in all things, so that they too might prove worthy of the same Bestowal. It would have been hard on a youth, understanding that even if he did everything right an accident of birth meant he'd never be fully able to live up to his legacy. Someone sharing that hardship would have been a dear friend.

"One of our riders saw our line's colours on the armour of one of the skeletons," he said. "Enamelled scale. The pattern was an old one but undeniably Tanja, One of our own, snatched up during some crusade and now fielded as a footsoldier!"

His smile spread, and grew bleaker.

"Alis has – had – no deeds to her name, Black Queen," Razin Tanja told me. "Levant is united against Keter, our people no longer fight honour wars. She lost her finest warring years in obscurity. And so I thought I could do this for her, give her..."

"A duel that'd make her reputation," I quietly finished.

To Blood, honour and reputation often mattered more than gold. A grand gift for an old friend.

"The skeletons were barely more numerous than us," Razin said, "and they would not have engaged wooden walls. I delayed to bait

them, sent out our horse to take the flanks at a distance to prevent them from retreating when they got close."

"It was a trap," I said.

"Ghouls had burrowed beneath the earth," the Lord of Malaga said. "So when the skeletons were close and we began to make the walls, they rose in ambush."

I let out a long breath. Shit. Yeah, that was classic Keteran tactics. The ghouls would have done some damage, surprising the Levantines like that, but there couldn't have been too many of them or the digging would have been easy to notice. No, they'd been a unit sacrificed to prevent the *holzburg* from being raised before the skeletons closed the distance. With numbers like that, the dead had never been going to win the skirmish. The Dead King had just traded corpses for corpses, knowing he could afford to bury us one patrol at a time. Rough night, going through that. Especially if it got your favourite cousin killed, which by the look on his face I was guessing it had.

"Alis?" I asked.

"She died after having slain three ghouls single-handedly," Razin said. "Her deed was deemed worthy of being added to the Rolls."

I remained silent. I'd not known her, so even commiserating with his loss seemed like a lie.

"Go on," Razin bitterly said. "Have you not warned us again and again that there is no honour to be found in this war, Catherine Foundling? That our ways are that of fools, when kept to in the shadow of the Crown of the Dead, and that we must discard them or suffer loss."

His teeth gritted.

"As I have," he said. "As I might again."

I could have excused him, I thought, spoken of good intentions and everyone making mistakes. But I was not his mother, or his friend, and what he had done should not be excused. So instead I leaned back into my chair and sighed.

"I was sixteen," I quietly said, "the first time I made a decision that got people killed."

His stiffened, dark eyes narrowing in on me.

"I'd killed before," I noted. "But this was different. I didn't swing a blade at them, it was just... consequences."

"What happened?" Razin Tanja rasped out.

"I spared a man," I said. "Not out of mercy, but because I needed him to escape and cause great troubles. It's not only your people who make their reputations by putting down lions on the loose, Razin. I spared him when I could have taken his life, and because of that people died."

I half-smiled.

"It could be said they hanged because they chose to scheme rebellion," I said. "Or that they hanged because the Carrion Lord ordered they would. The choice I made wasn't the only one that led us there."

I traced the wooden surface with my fingers.

"But when I was made to look at those corpses hanging from the gallows," I said, "I knew it was on me. That the decision I'd made had its hooks in all the others, that maybe I wasn't guilty but that I was at least *responsible*."

God, there'd been a barmaid who'd flirted with me. The look in her eyes, before the drop... For the life of me I could not remember her name, and it made me feel oddly ashamed.

"So what did you do, after?" the Lord of Malaga asked.

I'd wept, that was the truth of it. Wept in an alley where no one would see me, afraid and alone and a long way from home. And in the weeks that'd followed I'd come close to abandoning my path, until my confrontation with Akua had the Blessed Isle granted me... perspective of a kind.

"There is not panacea to this, Razin," I told him. "You grow number to the losses, eventually, but it never entirely goes away."

"Some wisdom, this," the younger man scoffed.

"Remember tonight," I told him quietly. "Beyond the bruise. Remember the mistake, how it felt as it rippled out into the world and took something dear from you. And use that to never make the same mistake again, Razin."

His jaw set, and slowly he nodded.

"There will be other mistakes," I said. "Other defeats. Own them too, Razin Tanja, use them to rise – or you'll be mourning a great deal more than a cousin."

He chuckled, though the sound was mirthless.

"The more I gain, Black Queen, the more I am afraid," he said. "What was there to fear losing, when I had nothing?"

You and me both, kid, I thought. Yet I had said all that I had to say, and if there was someone who would ease his grief it was not me. The most kindness I could offer was to leave and make room for them to step into the space I was occupying. I rose to my feet, feeling my leg throb and offered him a nod. He did not object to my departure.

"Black Queen," Razin of the Binder's Blood said, sending me off with a sharp nod.

I hesitated, fingers lingering against the table.

"I'm sorry for your loss," I finally said.

The silence followed me out.

—

Hakram's people found me before I'd even made it out of the officer district, before my feet had found a destination — I felt too restless for sleep, even this late — and the news were whispered directly into my ear. I thanked the messenger absent-mindedly, my thoughts already racing ahead of me. Finally. It was about time he arrived. That they'd not caught sight of him before he was already deep in the stronghold was not unexpected, if hardly pleasant to hear, but his destination at least was predictable. It was always the first part of any camp he visited, unless prior demands on his time had been made. Night settled on me as a veil as I limped out, not to make me invisible to eyes but to mask my presence.

It was a weave taught to me by Andronike herself, a use of Night inspired by a spell that'd once been a favourite of the Twilight Sages: I would be seen as unremarkable, and details of me would be difficult to remember. Adjutant had called it a *poor man's Scribe*, which had the benefit of being both amusing and pretty accurate. In the soldierly parts of the stronghold I would not have bothered, for my face — or more accurately my mantle and staff — was a key that opened gates and lowered wards. But no stronghold as large as Neustal, whose span occupied several tortured miles, could be filled entirely by soldiers. We had cooks, launderers, sutlers and peddlers.

A few brothels as well, though after a few incidents where laundresses were harassed by soldiers we'd confined them all to a particular district. That way there could be no confusion as to what services were by offered by whom, and there would be no qualms about flogging anyone who didn't understand what 'no' meant.

The Legions of Terror and the Army of Callow both forbade camp followers, which these people effectively were, as they slowed marches and drained as much resources as they provided. Here it

would have been a fool's errand to try the same, though, considering Proceran armies had them in spades. I'd first believed the Lycaonese didn't, but it turned out they just armed them like they did essentially everyone they could afford to. These *helfer* and *helferin* only fought under specific circumstances, and otherwise essentially served the same purposes. The Levantines had brought few aside from warriors up north, but their rank and file had been eager enough to partake of the creature comforts.

If the civilians were to stay then there could be no question of them staying outside the walls where they might be vulnerable to raids by the dead, so Neustal had whelped civilian quarters to stash them away in. It was towards these I headed, limp and all. In particular towards the long loghouse that was the busiest brothel in the stronghold, though I did not take the entrance a patron would. I went to the back, and slipped past the hired toughs guarding the entrance. The man who was arguably the most famous hero of our age was smiling and laughing with the brothel girls and boys as he deftly wove Light to heal their pains and sicknesses.

The Grey Pilgrim looked utterly at ease around them, and more surprisingly they around him. I'd started near enough the bottom of the ladder to know that just because some smiling highborn was comfortable around you didn't mean the feeling was reciprocated. *Peregrine* was the name they used for him, so they knew who he was, but for all that they did not seem intimidated. And they really had no reason to be, didn't they? Unlike kings and Named, they were not of that small slice of the world that Tariq Fleetfoot kept a wary eye on. They really did have nothing to fear from him.

Not unless their deaths would prevent a greater evil, anyway.

I waited until he was done. Unlike soldiers, these people wouldn't have the benefits of priests and mages to call on for healing – not by right, anyway. If the Pilgrim wanted to do a little good here, far be it from me to stand in his way. The night was long, and I was not yet tired. They pressed a cup of wine on him before he left, which he only half-drunk, and when the Peregrine wandered back onto the streets I was but a step behind him. There was no question that he had not known of my presence, for even if he'd somehow missed the Ophanim would not have. He did not turn or look at me, but something in his bearing acknowledged my presence.

"There are others in need of healing," Tariq said.

"There's always people in need of healing," I replied. "Hurt is tireless."

"Too often it is those who offer comfort, north of Levant," he said. "It is shameful how the occupation is treated by some."

"We're not targeting the brothels, Pilgrim," I sharply said. "Or even civilians. But I won't assign healers to these districts that would instead be with patrols or manning our infirmaries."

We already had too few, be they priests or mages. I'd not forbid any volunteering their hours, so long as it did not result in exhaustion, but I'd not command the death of soldiers fighting Keter to accommodate people who'd come here knowing this was a war front. We were a stronghold, not a town. I was not unreasonable for denying something they had no right to ask for.

"Then do not deny me my works, Catherine," the Peregrine replied. "If I can allay suffering, I will."

"No lack of that going around, these days," I grunted.

"Denial or suffering?" he asked.

"No danger of either running out, I reckon," I shrugged. "But they're not why I sought you out. We're overdue a talk."

He cast a searching look on me, and I was unsurprised to realize that my veils of Night were nothing more than puffs of smoke to those eyes.

"You have held to your word when it comes to young Razin and Aquiline," he said. "I take it you now want them removed from your care."

"That'd be nice," I said. "Though on occasion they forget to be a pain in my ass, so I don't mind lending the equally occasional hand."

"Headstrong youths can be troublesome, it is true," the Peregrine said.

I eyed him, almost amused. How many decades had it taken him to get the art down of saying something like that without even the faintest hint of irony?

"So I've heard," I said. "But your headstrong lordlings aren't why I'm here."

"Ah," the old man calmly said. "It's to be that talk, is it?"

"Yeah," I grimly replied, baring my teeth. "Let's talk about the Wandering Bard, Tariq."

Chapter 45: Progress

"- one might then wonder if a kingdom's sufferance of a tyrant for a decade is not worth the inevitable successful uprising by an usurped relative and the golden age it will usher. Given the frequent petty cruelty and mediocrity of kings, might it not be worth inducing a great tyrant so that a great ruler will follow them?"

– Extract from the controversial treatise 'Ethics of Fate' by Kalchas the Gadfly, Atalantian philosopher

The tavern had closed hours ago, as it was the middle of the night, but the Peregrine had a knack for getting into places he shouldn't and I had a Night-trick decent with locks. I snapped my fingers and a few streaks of black flame sputtered to life in hanging lanterns, revealing a dirt floor to the large room. Just like the one we'd had in the Rat's Nest. Feeling just a tad nostalgic, I limped up behind the bar – a nice large oaken piece – and went looking through the bottles after leaning my staff against the side. Whoever ran this place kept a cudgel under the counter, I noted with approval. Good form.

I snatched up a bottle of what looked like genuine Neustrian schnaps, pulling the cork and taking a sniff. Apple, maybe? It'd do. Klaus Papenheim loved the stuff, and he'd offered it to me enough I'd acquired a taste for it. I took up one of the wooden cups and filled it, cocking an eyebrow at Tariq when he sat himself on the other side of the counter.

"What's your poison, Pilgrim?" I asked.

"I don't suppose there's a pear brandy lying around?" the old man asked. "Alavan, if possible."

I looked through the stock but there wasn't, sadly enough.

"Closest they've got is some sort of berry brandy," I told him, "and it looks Arlesite, though Gods only know from where beyond that."

"Now you have me curious, I'll admit," the Pilgrim said. "If you don't mind?"

I deftly set the cup down on the counter without turning as I took the bottle – some things never quite went, huh – and poured him a finger. I sniffed the bottle discreetly afterwards and almost gagged. It smelled like a whole bush had died in there along the promised berries. This might be the Grand Alliance's camp but I wasn't a robber queen, so I placed two golden crowns where the bottle I'd taken had stood. I cast a look at Tariq, who looked faintly embarrassed.

"I have been travelling light," he admitted.

He wasn't so crass as to actually outright request I pay for his drink, though, I noted with amusement.

"*Heroes*," I sighed, teasing.

I was actually out of crowns by I had a Praesi *aurelius* and a Proceran *gran*, which should more or less cover the costs. The gran was less pure, and so worth less, but some places refused imperial coinage as they believed it to be cursed. I vaguely remembered that one of the Dread Emperors *had* in fact tried to drive a chunk of Callowan nobility mad by cursing coinage a few centuries back so I couldn't even blame them.

"You're covered for the bottle," I said, and raised my cup.

He matched it with his, and the drink went down. I laughed after it went down, my throat aflame. Damn, but the Lycaonese liked it with a kick. Orcs would actually enjoy drinking this, which was a standard rarely met.

"Business, then," I said.

"Business," Tariq agreed.

I said nothing, only cocking an eyebrow as I leaned against the counter.

"I will assume," the Grey Pilgrim said, "that your intent is not to gloat."

"I like to think I'm above such things," I lied.

"Naturally," the Peregrine seriously agreed.

A beat of silence passed.

"That said," I thinly smiled, "I fucking told you so."

He sighed, but did not disagree. That was already promising. I'd not been sure exactly what to expect, as the silence and eventual assent from the Dominion when I'd gotten the Wandering Bard to be designated as formal enemy of the Grand Alliance had only told me he'd abstained from getting involved. His actual thoughts remained unknown to me.

"It is possible that the attack on the Arsenal was meant to aid in the long term," Tariq said, then grimaced and poured himself another finger of brandy. "But that is irrelevant. She has forced us to take her as an enemy through her actions, regardless of whatever intent might lie behind them."

"There's precious few acts you can't justify by saying they'll help down the line," I flatly replied. "That does tend to be the convenient thing about using the future for proof."

"Peace, Black Queen. I am not attempting to justify the Wandering Bard's offences against us," Tariq tiredly said. "Merely struggling to reconcile the woman I have known for a very long time with the one who is now my foe."

Much as I hated it'd taken him this long to get here, it was starting to look he actually was there so I swallowed the many barbs still on the tip of my tongue. Rubbing salt in the wound would get me nothing save a fleeting moment of satisfaction.

"Then we're in agreement that she's kill-on-sight," I said. "And that an order ensuring as much comes down on both your side and mine."

"You are unlikely to actually kill her, using such means," Tariq said. "But I do not disagree with the principle: her power comes from access to and influence over Bestowed, stripping her from these strengths is sensible."

"Sensible," I slowly repeated. "Yes, I believe so. Another sensible thing would be, for example, how you came to be so certain she won't die. I know why I think that, Peregrine, but you've been less than forthcoming about your ties with her."

"Should I complain to my representative under the Terms and being so clandestinely approached?" the Pilgrim drily said.

I filled my glass, conspicuously.

"This is just two old friends having a drink and a chat, Tariq," I toothily smiled. "Not an interrogation. Skirt around the letter of the law, me? Perish the thought."

He cocked a brow.

"Perish is the right word," the old man said. "How does the Red Axe fare, these days?"

"I believe they went with decapitation," I said. "'twas a little late to boil her alive, admittedly, and a brisk hanging would have been good fun but little else."

I suspected that Hasenbach had been amused, in that discreet way of hers, that from now when the execution by sword of the Red Axe was spoken of there would be a great deal of trouble over the nomenclature. Mind you, that it would add a dash of confusion to any rumours about the execution in the Arsenal was a more likely culprit for why she might have arranged that.

"You lost trust when you arranged that," Tariq said. "Some with our Bestowed, more with the man who leads them."

"Tell me something I don't know," I replied, almost rolling my eyes. "You disapprove, I take it?"

He sighed.

"No," the Grey Pilgrim finally said. "It helped stave off the collapse of Procer at otherwise minor costs. I only wish it had not forced a distancing between yourself and young Hanno, though perhaps it is for the best."

I drank of my cup, silently inviting him to elaborate.

"The cordiality of the relationship between you two has much been commented on," he said.

"If this is going to turn into another polite request I don't sleep with him, I'm going to get miffed at having to repeat I'm not interested," I warned him.

"I believe you," Tariq replied, sounding like he meant it. "But friendship is already seen as dangerous enough. You represent interests, the both of you, and those interests are often at odds. Friendship complicates that."

I waved him down.

"Bullshit," I frankly said. "If anything liking him made dealing with him significantly easier. But it's no longer an issue anyway. Let those fears be buried, and instead of dealing with fish market gossip we can perhaps deal with the endless undead armies trying to kill us all."

"I have yet to witness any power in this world or the next that quell gossip," Tariq amusedly said, "but your point is taken."

"Good," I said. "I believe we were talking about the Bard?"

The Grey Pilgrim conceded with a nod.

"We first met in the Free Cities, when I intervened in a spot of trouble within the Helikean royal family," he said. "I took her for a simple Bard, that first time, but recognizing her under a different face a few years later put paid to that notion."

Yeah, that'd do it. I still wasn't sure what his reading aspect exactly was, but it was frighteningly sharp even when the Ophanim weren't actively whispering secrets into his ear.

"And you knew she wasn't strictly one of Above's," I pointed out. "You weren't surprised when I told you I'd seen her work on Below's behalf."

Blue eyes sad, he nodded.

"That much became beyond dispute when she disrupted my pursuit of a villain in Lange within a decade of our first meeting," Tariq said, "forcing me to retreat from the Principality entirely and so lose the trail."

I whistled.

"And you didn't, you know," I delicately said, slicing a finger across my throat, "try to Mercy her afterwards, so to speak."

I glanced atop the hero's sparse crown of white hair apologetically.

"No offence meant, fellows," I added.

I didn't get smote, so I decided to ascribe a passable sense of humor to the Choir of Mercy. The things you learned, huh?

"None was taken," the Pilgrim informed me. "Though after your... colourful conversations with Contrition and Endurance, that could be seen as favoritism."

I winked above his head.

"Don't spread it around," I loudly whispered.

Long-suffering, he sipped at his drink and sighed.

"I did, in fact, try to kill her," Tariq said. "It did not take, evidently, and the misgivings of my patrons in pursuing her demise gave me pause. As did the eventual realization that the young villain she'd helped escape me had within the year died fighting another villainess, in the process exposing her schemes in Penthes."

Ah, I thought. There it was, the first of the missing pieces. Tariq trusted the Ophanim, and we'd already established that the Intercessor could affect angels.

"You thought she was another like you," I realized. "Only subtler and older."

"It was my belief that she was not a willing servant to Below, and so that she ensured all the victories arranged in their name would lead to starker defeats down the line," the Pilgrim admitted. "I suspected her forced service to be a consequence of the nature of her Bestowal, a storyteller's duty to attend to the foe as well as the hero."

"She's not like us, Pilgrim," I said. "Named, sure, but I get the feeling there's a lot less between her and the Gods than there is for the rest of us."

"The sufferings she attended to are on a scale we can hardly imagine," Tariq softly agreed. "And so I did not judge, Catherine, to borrow another man's words. Even with the wisdom of the Ophanim close to me, I cannot begin to understand the crushing burden of her purpose. Weighing the suffering of a century knowing it might spare another, patching and bleeding nations to prevent greater horrors – a millennia of ugly choices, one after another."

He looked grieved.

"And still she did good whenever she could, I have seen this," the Pilgrim said. "It was she who led me to heal Laurence after her duel with the Ranger, did you know?"

I blinked.

"I had no idea," I said.

I'd known about the duel between a younger Saint of Swords and Ranger, since Indrani had told me what she knew, but I'd never known the Pilgrim to be involved.

"I trusted her," Tariq admitted, "to see a path out of the dark even when I did not."

I'd never really had that kind of trust in me, but then I supposed there was a reason I'd become a villain and not a heroine.

"I still believe she seeks a better future for Calernia," the Grey Pilgrim admitted. "But that is not enough. I have seen the world we would make, through the Alliance and the Accords, and I am willing to fight for it. If she seeks to darken that path, then she is my enemy regardless of her intent."

Not exactly the ringing endorsement of killing the Intercessor first change we got I'd kind of been hoping for, but life was all about tempering your expectations. I'd settle for a grief-stricken fight between past comrades if that was all he had it in him to summon up.

"More will be asked of you," I bluntly said. "I know there are dangers, but by the White Knight's sentencing you've gained a pupil in Christophe de Pavanie."

"I am aware," Tariq frowned.

"What you're not aware of is how he's tied to that mess in Cleves," I said. "You know, the House of Langevin being made to eat crow."

"He's the reason Prince Gaspard abdicated in favour of his son?" the Pilgrim asked, sounding surprised.

Hasenbach had wasted no time spending the political capital she'd gained through the trial, though at least she'd been subtle about it. Gaspard Langevin had, officially, taken a bad wound and passed the burden of leadership to his younger and more vital son. It'd been an unpopular move in Cleves, where the man was respected, but Hasenbach had privately marshaled the Highest Assembly using his ties to the Mirror Knight as an anchor around his neck instead of the trump card Gaspard had likely seen them as. The army under General Rumena then leaving regardless of protests had made it very clear to him that he'd made more enemies than his house could afford, driving the final nail in the coffin.

"Not exactly," I said. "But he was involved."

I elaborated quickly, laying out the concerns Sve Noc had brought to me along with the plot and the difficulties the situation had represented for the First Prince: stark consequences to acting, worse if she did not.

"I'm assuming Hanno will speak to you as well when he arrives with the Mirror Knight," I said. "But I wanted you to know the nature of what's being dropped on your lap. He needs to be straightened up before he blunders into another mess like this, Pilgrim."

I grimaced.

"He's still the best match we have with the Severance," I reluctantly admitted. "And I'd be a lot more comfortable trusting him with that power if you were able to first look me in the eye and promise he wasn't going to shit the bed with it."

If anyone could do it, mind you, it was the Peregrine. As far as heroes were concerned, he was *the* mentor. To Tariq's honour, he did not balk or try to pass the responsibility to another.

"How long would I have with him?" the Pilgrim asked.

"If things go well, we want to try Keter next summer," I said. "I know it's not long, but..."

"I will do all I can," Tariq simply promised.

"Hells," I grimly said, "that's all I can ask, isn't it?"

And on that we toasted, cups rising in accord and going down with the same.

—

It was probably a good thing that our attendants were far enough behind they couldn't hear us speak as watched over the entrance

of the reinforcements into the stronghold with threadbare ceremony.

"I don't know what my niece has been bribing the Levantines with, but I hope we have more in stock," Prince Klaus Papenheim appreciatively said.

The older man was eyeing the rows of heavy Alavan foot with an almost hungry look. I snorted at the sight. I'd found it difficult not to like the grizzled Prince of Hannover from the start, even knowing he'd almost been one of the leading generals in the invasion of Callow. He was from a mould I was familiar with, that I'd spent most my life around: an old soldier, a veteran who'd spent almost as much time on the saddle as reigning in his capital. My reputation with Lycaonese tended to be decent, for a servant of wicked power, but I'd not expected the old prince to take to me as well.

"Having infantry envy, are we?" I mused. "That ought to be a familiar feeling by now."

More a tease than a truth. An open ground exercises my army tended to trounce his own, but the moment the terrain got difficult the balance tended to swing harshly the other way. It'd been about as I expected, given the difficulty of using classic Legion tactics in the mountains when they'd been designed to win wars on the plains of Callow. On those plains, though, Black's war machine still reigned queen despite the best efforts of the opposition. The Lycaonese were good, but they hadn't mastered the tactics of the Reform yet.

They'd find it difficult to catch up there, since their lack of mage was even worse than my own. Unfortunately for them, they wouldn't have the workaround of having stolen a Legion or two as I'd done when founding the Army of Callow.

"Talk to me when your lot use a goat path without waking up all of Ashur," the one-armed prince scathingly replied.

The obligatory trading of insults having been seen to, I took a better look at the six thousand troops Lord Yannu Marave had sent our way. Most of them Alavan, by the colours on the shields and faces, but I was hardly complaining about that: the Champion's Blood coughed up to arm its heavies in good mail and plate, and they fought ferociously with their swords and shields. Two thousand of the Levantines were lesser captains sworn to the Holy Seljun instead of Alava, though the pattern for why they'd been chosen was neither the size of their warband nor their origins. Instead they were all, in majority, made up of slingers. Less a boon than the heavies, these, but still very much a boon.

The Dominion's armies were inferior to those of Procer and Callow in several regards, but they were also the only standing force

that still fielded slingers – whose thrown stones had proved to have a great deal of bite against the undead than arrows.

“That was the last major force we were waiting on,” I said. “The White Knight will arrive with Named and the latest from the Arsenal in a few days, which has us almost ready to begin the push.”

“Weren’t you waiting on some sort of Levantine bounty hunter?” the older man asked. “I was warned she might be trouble by the Silver Huntress.”

“The Headhunter’s a prick,” I conceded. “But they’re a prick with the finest tracking chops in the Grand Alliance. Archer went to fetch them, and they should both be here by dawn.”

The Prince of Hannover cocked a brow.

“They?” he asked.

“Fluid,” I explained.

He grunted in understanding.

“I want to split the Dominion forces between the armies when we move out,” Prince Klaus said, “You know their discipline holds better when they’re kept apart.”

“I also know it’ll be a cold day in Ater before you get Tanja and Aquiline to split,” I snorted.

“They listen to you,” the older man said.

“When it suits them,” I shrugged.

“Then take them both with you,” the Prince of Hannover said. “And leave me the Alavans.”

“Fat chance,” I replied. “I’d get both a guaranteed headache and fuck all slingers, Papenheim. Aren’t your people supposed to be all about giving people a fair shake?”

“And yours are supposed to spend their days trampling Praesi out in Streges, but it’s a strange new world,” he grunted back. “I’ll take the larger slice of fantassins and give you with Princess Beatrice if you agree.”

Now *that* was a tempting offer. My officers just didn’t have the knack for dealing with Proceran mercenaries without it going badly – falsifying a report in the Army got you caned and demoted, when it was considered common practice among those fantassin companies who even bothered with reports. Some poor Arlesite bastard had even tried to bribe an orc lieutenant, which

got him his throat ripped out and ten more people hanged in the aftermath of the vicious brawl that ensued.

"Gods, you must really hate dealing with the Blood," I said.

"That leaves you who to run the Alamans, Prince Arsene? The man's got all the boldness of a wet towel and I've never seen him send out his soldiers when he could pass the fight to others."

Never to the extent that it was insubordination or harmful to the war effort, but the Prince of Bayeux was very clearly trying to make sure his forces suffered as few casualties as possible even if that meant other forces would suffer instead.

"I'll have Mathilda breathing on his neck and fill his days with petty mercenary squabbles, it'll keep him too twitchy to be a load," the Prince of Hannover said. "I can't do either those things with your lordlings."

I hummed pensively, the two of us watching the brightly painted ranks of Dominion soldiers streaming in. I'd theoretically be leading the Second and Third Army on my prong of the offensive along with the lion's share of the Firstborn, so in truth I wasn't badly in need of more heavy foot. If I got the army of Hainaut I'd get what I considered to be the cream of the Alamans forces in the region as well as their finest cavalry captain, which gave me a solid force to work with.

"If I were selected to lead one of the offensives," I said. "That might be a tempting offer."

The older man spat to the side.

"You'll get one prong and me the other," Prince Klaus said. "It's a done deal, and I won't hear it otherwise. The lordlings are still too green and the only other one I'd trust with a large force is Volignac."

Prince Beatrice Volignac wouldn't be getting a command that size, though. Not only was most of her principality already occupied by the dead, the appointment of two Proceran commanders would go over... poorly with the coalition forces in Hainaut.

"You didn't agree outright," he said. "So out with it. What more do you want in the stew?"

"I want first pick of the fantassin companies," I said. "If my flanks are held by Levantines, I can't afford runners in the mercenaries."

"You're a cold one, Foundling," the grey-haired man said. "Sticking me with both the company dross and the Brabant conscripts?"

"I'll cede General Rumena in return," I offered. "It'll keep your sigils in good order."

Unlike the Prince of Hannover, I could handle the Firstborn just fine on my own. Mighty Jindrich could hold field command and I'd handle the rest. Offering General Rumena was not a small concession to make, given its known power and its standing as the finest commander among the drow, and I could see the older man was tempted.

"Agreed," Prince Klaus said, and spat into his palm.

I did the same and clasped his hand.

"May the Heavens strike a liar," the Prince of Hannover said.

"Crows take the oathbreaker," I replied, and we shook on it.

I could feel he was just as eager as me to get started on his planning, but to our common frustration there'd be no going anywhere. The Levantines had yet to finish coming into the stronghold, and it'd be poor politics to slight them by leaving early.

Gods if it wasn't boring as all Hells, though.

—

"Glaring won't add lines to the report," Hakram said. "Though I praise the quality of the effort."

I sighed and dropped back into my chair, blowing at an errant strand of hair that'd slipped out of my loose ponytail and gotten into my face. Sinfully comfortable as the seat liberated from Arcadia was, it did not improve my mood.

"It's ridiculous that we still have so little reliable information on the fantassins," I complained. "I know we're thin on Jacks, up here, but this isn't even bare bones. It's bare *bone*, maybe, and even then I'd argue it's not a full one."

I'd sent for all we had on the fantassin companies of the Hainaut front after returning to my tent – which I still used for work, if not always to sleep in – and even as the parchments flooded in my despair at what little we actually knew increased. Half of this was rumours – many reported by our soldiers, sure, but that didn't magically make them more than rumours – while the solid information was... sparse. Company names, captains and numbers. A few records, including who had gotten commendations for bravery, and a few bits about which companies were known to hate each other or to have bad blood with the Army of Callow. The three largest of the companies had a little more on them, a bit about

the leading officers and their reputations, but I had to admit this was largely a pile of nothing.

"I fucked myself negotiating with Papenheim," I noted. "I might have first pick of companies, but I can't even be sure what companies I should pick."

"Neither would the Iron Prince, dearest," Akua said.

Where Hakram had claimed a corner of the tent with several smaller tables set around his wooden wheelchair – though it was not all wood, and Masego had laid so many enchantments on the thing that wards sometimes confused it for a mage – Akua had instead claimed a seat around the table Indrani was still carving for me, and was lounging on it with a cup of wine in hand.

"Useless consolation," I replied in an irritated tone. "My favourite, how did you know?"

"I shall endeavour keep this revelation in mind, my heart," Akua silkily replied, "though it has nothing to do with the point I was making."

"Ah," Hakram exclaimed. "Beatrice Volignac. Clever."

I frowned. What did the Princess of Hainaut have to do with – *oh*. Shit, I hated it when Akua was right just after I'd gotten snippy with her. The Lycaonese weren't that much better at dealing with Alamans than my own officers, so the Iron Prince usually delegated that sort of thing to his most trusted among the Alamans royals, the Princess of Hainaut. The Prince of Hannover wouldn't be able to pick the companies any better than I, but Beatrice Volignac very likely could. She'd be assigned to my part of the offensive, too, so she'd have motivation not to be half-hearted about this.

"Set up a meeting with her, Adjutant," I said. "It's the kind of thing that needs to be asked in person. Tomorrow morning – wait, no, early afternoon."

It'd break one of those unspoken Alamans rules to ask her to do me that favour before she was officially folded under my command by our morning war council, even if the matter was effectively already settled.

"I'll see to it," Hakram said, his long and skeletal fingers jotting notes down on parchment. "You still need to decide where you'll be addressing the villains, Catherine. The earlier we settle that the better."

I grimaced. I'd wanted to wait until the White Knight was here to hold that, to ward off the perception that we might be plotting, but now that the last two of my lot were arriving with dawn the

Named I represented under the Terms were due a proper council. Some were getting restless, too, so I was wary of delaying further. So far I'd put them off by saying all was best addressed after the war council settled broader affairs, but that excuse would be expiring tomorrow morning as well. That meant I'd be meeting with the villains assembled in Hainaut before sundown, like it or not.

"I would suggest far from anything expensive," Adjutant dryly suggested, a peek of fangs revealing his amusement.

His face hadn't changed much, I thought. So when he was seated, when the fold of his clothes hid the missing arm and leg and meat, it was almost possible to forget. Almost.

"Outside would be best," I agreed. "Though I don't want eavesdropping, which limits our options. There's not a lot of places here warded up right for that."

Most of them were war rooms, personal quarters or other places of import. None of which I particularly wanted to shove a bunch of rowdy villains into.

"Make a request to borrow wardstones from the Gigantes," Hakram suggested. "This is Terms business, not personal, so you would be within your rights."

"There any left so spare?" I asked. "I know we restricted who can make requests, but they still go fast."

"I'll know within the hour," Adjutant promised. "If it is feasible?"

"Then do it," I ordered.

Which handled the privacy issues nicely. Leaving actual location as the last hurdle.

"In the country will have to do," I finally said. "I'd rather not do this in the stronghold proper, if I have a choice."

Obviously we wouldn't be doing this on the Dead King's side of the trenches, so it'd have to be south.

"Akua?" I asked. "You've flown over the region often enough."

"There's a large hill with a fire pit perhaps an hour away from Neustal," she noted. "Formerly used by shepherds, I believe. No other larger significance."

Mhm. Using somewhere with a little more weight to it would please those who liked to feel important – the Rapacious Troubadour and the Summoner came to mind – but I didn't necessarily want to encourage the perception that this was a council momentous in any

way. It was a relatively large assembly of Named, but it should be nothing more than that.

"It'll do," I said, then sighed. "All right, what's next?"

The night was still young, and so there was still work to be done.

Chapter 46: Vestibule

"I make it a habit to kill all the people at court who do not want to usurp me, as they are principled fellows and so eminently more dangerous than your average conspirators."

– Dread Emperor Iniquitous, first of the 'Mayfly Emperors'

As of dawn there were eleven villains in Hainaut, if I was considered to stand among their number even with my Name not yet fully formed.

We didn't even make up half the Named currently in the principality, though at least we did count for more than a third, yet I honestly couldn't think of many occasions where so many villainous Named had gathered together in the same place at the same time – much less while being on the same side. Not unless Revenants counted, anyway, which in my opinion they did not. It was a lot easier to herd cats when they were dead. This was not the sort of thing to approach half-cocked, but I found there was a remarkable scarcity of knowledge on affairs this: even more than heroes, Below's lot clutched their secrets tightly.

Fortunately for me, I had to the former heiress to Wolof in my service. And considering that Akua had once intended to rule all of Calernia, she'd paid even closer attention to the underlying currents of villainy that your average Sahelian scion would have. She'd wanted to avoid the mistakes of her predecessors, after all. Her ambition itself might have been foolish, but I had to concede she'd not gone about pursuing it foolishly. Save for one or two exceptions. When I brought up the subject in my tent early in the morning, over my breakfast, I found her almost eager to talk about it. It was subject of long-standing fascination for her, as it turned out.

"Alliances between villains have not been studied in great depth outside of Praes," Akua told me, still sounding pleased by the line of inquiry. "And aside from the Tower itself, there are none who can rival the records of Wolof on the subject. It was of great interest to my predecessors, as you might imagine."

Wasn't hard to. I'd seen enough corpses I barely needed to try.

"I recall hearing the Sahelians haven't raised the most tyrants, among the old families," I noted a tad more diplomatically. "Though you're up there for Warlocks, right?"

"The Mirembe of Aksum are not far behind us on the latter count," Akua said. "Six less, I believe, though it might have changed since I absented myself. They raised very different practitioners from my family, however, and their arts have not well adapted to modern warmaking."

I cocked an eyebrow, curious as to what Praesi highborn might consider sorcery aging poorly. Devils didn't exactly get dusty.

"Impractical?" I asked.

"Aksum was once known as the Cauldron of Beasts," she said. "The Mirembe have long been known for their interest in the crafting and alteration of life."

Monster-making, she meant. Charming.

"They dabbled in heredity as well, and created the first known stable breeding program," Akua continued. "The practices have since shifted, of course, but their work remains foundational."

I could see why their specialties had not aged well. In the old stories the Praesi always came at Callow with a few horrifying monsters that one of our heroes ended up killing, and the stories about the orcs that could breathe under water and the sentient tigers were infamous even out west. Not a lot of those had been successes in a more than marginal sense, though, and the Reforms would have been the final nail in their coffin – especially so after the Conquest proved that the Legions as envisioned by Grem One-Eye and my father were highly effective. And since every High Seat and more than a few lesser lords now ran their own breeding programs, it'd not given the Mirembe a lasting advantage.

"That aside, I would caution you to think of raising too many tyrants as a crown worth contending for in the eyes of the High Seats," Akua said. "The Yeboah of Nok once succeeded at claiming the Tower three generations in a row, but none of the oldfamilies were willing to allow rule of Praes to be clutched too tightly. Their lines was exterminated to the last, and the Sesay were installed to rule the city."

"I get your point," I drily said. "It wasn't in the interest of the Sahelians to win too much, even when they could."

"Exactly," Akua smiled. "Though even over periods of relative humility my ancestors were not the kind of people to suffer lack of influence. As the Empire often boasts the largest concentration of allied villains on Calernia in any generation, grasping the nature of such alliances was a necessity."

"Allied might be a bit of a stretch," I snorted.

Back in the old days Praes had usually counted more Named than the kingdom, but they'd so frequently lost in part because they were as interested in backstabbing each other as actually stabbing Callow.

"Perhaps not to the extent of the Calamites," Akua noted, "but you would be surprised. The most famous example would be the Black Knight and Chancellor of Malignant the Second, who all histories agree loved him deeply. It is why the man reigned a full decade and a half while his handling of the Empire can most charitably be describe as occasionally benign ineptitude."

There'd been a sprinkling of occasions like these throughout imperial history, she told me, but the pattern that emerged to my ear was that the bonds were usually between smaller groups: a pair or maybe three Named, often who'd come up through a transitional Name together. About half of the time they ended up offing the ruling tyrant and putting one of them up on the seat instead. Being a tightly bound band of five, and one essentially loyal to the ruling Empress to boot, was where the Calamities had broken fresh grounds.

"The Empire usually waxes and wanes between three and eight villains at any time," Akua said. "Though only four Names are considered to be part of the fabric of Praes."

I didn't need her to tell me which. *Dread Emperor, Chancellor, Warlock and Black Knight*. The four roles that'd been at the core of the Empire's way of life for centuries, Yet I was now learning that there were much more nuances to those roles than I'd believed. For one, not all Names came with every generation. Praesi highborn usually saw which had had come and which had not as an indication of what should be expected from a reign.

"It is usually seen as the mark of a weak tyrant to have a Chancellor but no Black Knight," she told me. "On the other hand, one who claimed the Tower with both a Black Knight and a Warlock but no Chancellor will be expected to aggressively contest influence with the High Seats – often with a measure of success, historically speaking."

"But you get other Named as well," I said. "There's been other Assassins – in other places too, but more in Praes – and old Callowan histories speak of Necromancers too."

Unfortunately the skill of Praesi in that branch of sorcery paired with the relative magical ignorance of my countrymen meant that old records could often only guess at if they'd been dealing with a necromancer or a Necromancer.

"Indeed," Akua nodded. "Before the Wars of the Dead it was common for a Lich to exist, and since the heyday of fighting arenas in Maleficent the Second's reign we've had recurring Gladiators. The latter is even more common in Stygia, however, and so somewhat looked down."

"Of course it is," I sighed "I take it Names without much precedent are also considered pedestrian?"

"The Captain and the Scribe were once underestimated for this very reason," Akua said, then looked chagrined. "I was not immune to some shade of that foolishness, I'll admit. I once thought very little of the Scribe."

"She cultivates that impression actively," I said with a kernel of sympathy, though it really *had* been a mistake.

The Scribe's spies had been instrumental in keeping her contained, back when she'd been Governess of Liesse, and that was just a drop in the bucket of the quiet work done to hasten her downfall. The bloody coup against Hasenbach in Salia was a good example of what Scribe could when let off the leash, and its aftermath was *still* haunting the First Prince even years later.

"So I've head," Akua neutrally said. "Regardless, the Empire's traditional position as the leading light of villainy-"

Did that count as blasphemy, I wondered? Probably not unless she was talking about Light.

"- has meant that foreign villains whose defeats were not mortal have often fled to Praes for refuge. Treatment varied according to who held the Tower, but some rose quite high when the Dread Empire was expanding and looking for champions. Sorcerous, in particular, opened his court to many and gave them great authority."

My brow rose.

"I don't recall hearing of any foreign villains in Praes during my lifetime," I said. "Which surprises me, considering the Grey Pilgrim has been terrorizing villains out west and south. There were bound to have been a few who wanted to get out before either he or the Saint strolled into town."

"The end of the last two gave pause to any possible takers, I expect," Akua drily said.

A beat passed.

"Black killed them, didn't he?" I bluntly said.

"They came in the decades preceding our births – the Reaver from Penthesand the Blue Mage from Ashur, to be specific – but they

were brought in as helpers for the Purebloods," Akua elaborated. "Naturally the Carrion Lord brutally murdered them at the first halfway decent excuse and extended the purge to anyone associated with them. An entire branch family of the Niri of Okoro was forced to eat until their stomachs burst in what he called a warning about 'overly ambitious appetite'."

I coughed to hide the way my lips were treacherously twitching upwards. She noticed.

"It's considered one of the reasons for the later succession crisis in Okoro," Akua reproached.

"Very sad," I got out soberly. "Not at all ironic, or in any way cathartic to hear about."

I changed the subject before that woeful look she was giving me could lead to a reproach about the importance of *not* killing Wasteland aristocrats in amusing ways. Talk about not knowing your audience.

"Praes isn't the only place to have had villain alliances, though," I said. "We had the Sable Order, in Callow, and the Free Cities were whipped by the League of Rogues for a while."

The Sable Order had been a chivalric order led by four fallen heroes who'd gathered a lot of disaffected knights, bandits and penniless soldiers in an army and brought the kingdom to its knees. They'd had the run of the countryside for years, until the Albans managed to finally beat them on the field. The League of Rogues – although they'd never called themselves that, and the name had come with later histories – has been even more successful, the seven villains having occupied half the Free Cities for over a decade and cowed even Ashur for a time. About two centuries back, I figured?

I remembered them in part because they'd surprised me, as a kid. They'd been unusually steadfast allies even when they began losing ground, supposedly because they'd taken oaths of mutual loyalty to each other guaranteed by devils. I'd wondered why every villain do that for two months, until I got my hands on the second volume of *Wicked Deeds* and learned about the very ugly way the last two had died when the devils came to collect.

"The Iron Kingdoms are arguably a greater success story than either of these," Akua replied.

I blinked in surprise.

"Those collapsed almost immediately," I slowly said. "And they were a refuge for villains, but hardly led by them."

It'd been one of the history lessons from the orphanage tutors instead of one of my private forays, but I distinctly remembered being told this.

"That is what Proceran histories insist, yes," she amusedly told me. "And so most everyone believes. Fortunately one of my ancestors, Elimu Sahelian, served as court mage to 'Queen' Alandra so we reliably know otherwise from his memoirs."

"He served as what now?" I flatly asked.

"Court mage," she repeated. "It is an old practice of my family, dearest. We've gathered many secrets and artefacts this way, leaving with them when the cause collapse. We did the same thing with Theodosius the Unconquered himself, and a dozen other lesser hegemons."

I was quite itching to get my hands on the memoirs of whoever the Sahelians had sent to advise the man that was arguably the greatest military mind in Calernian history, but that could wait until later.

"So the Iron Kingdoms were a villain alliance?" I frowned.

These days some scholars even argued that the name 'Iron Kingdoms' was meaningless, that it'd simply been a very chaotic period in Proceran and Levantine history where rule of law had frayed nearly beyond repair in a certain region, but that wasn't yet the traditional view. Properly speaking, the words referred to a bunch of bandit fiefdoms that'd briefly seized control of most of current Valencis as well as the adjoining Brocelian Forest and Cusp.

"It was led by nine bandit and raider Named," Akua agreed, "the remembered kings and queens of iron. And while three of the 'kingdoms' collapsed swiftly, as you said, others fared much better. It was nearly nine years before Valencis was fully reclaimed, and it took over two decades before the five kingdoms in the Brocelian were brought down by heroes."

I let out a thoughtful noise. Yeah, I could see why Procer in particular would have wanted to keep that story quiet. These days the Principate went all Damned this and Damned that when Named got inconvenient, but it'd been a lot younger back then. It would have been a bad blow to its prestige if a pack of villains had been able to seize one of its principalities. The kind of blow that made fresh conquests consider rebellion and borderlands mull independence. The histories I'd been taught would be a lot more palatable to the Highest Assembly, and safer to own up to.

"Neither Praes or these alliances really fit what we have as a precedent," I finally decided.

"This is true," Akua easily said, "but attempting to establish direct precedents when multiple Named are involved is foted a fool's errand regardless. Valuable insight can still be gained from observing what led to the victories and the failures of these arrangements."

"Infighting," I drolly said. "And heroes. Occasionally armies paired with the previous too."

"Yes, very clever," she replied, rolling her eyes. "About what I might have expected, given your terrible essay on the Licerian Wars."

I gaped at her. Wait, *what*? Shit, no, it actually made sense that she might have read that at some point. Sure, it was a piece of homework I'd written half-drunk in the backroom of the Rat's Nest, but Malicia's spymistress had gotten her hands on it back in the day – she'd even mentioned it, when we'd first spoken in the Tower. The Sahelians had infiltrated the Eyes and the Tower, back in the day, though I was never sure to quite what extent. Merciless Gods, though, was this the only piece of writing that I was ever going to be known by?

"At least Hasenbach won't know about it," I mused.

"Mother sold quite a bit of imperial intelligence through Mercantis when her coffers ran low, so she actually might," Akua amusedly replied.

Goddamn Sahelians, I uncharitably thought. Given my luck, that fucking thing was going to end up my only written work to be passed down the ages.

"Regardless, my heart, you are correct that infighting is a recurring pattern," the shade mused. "Arguably the most important. It has been the end of many a skillful reign in Ater, and certainly precipitated the fall of the Iron Kingdoms."

"That's the nature of villainy, to an extent," I said. "You don't become one without being hard-headed, and unlike heroes we tend to see each other as potential threats instead of potential allies. That's a recipe for blood on the floor at the first disagreement."

Heroes did kill each other on occasion too, I wouldn't ignore that, but it was significantly rarer.

"Ah, but there lies the area of interest," she smiled, golden eyes alight with pleasure. "What aspect of villainy in particular drives us to conflict amongst ourselves? I have pondered this long, Catherine, as when I dreamed of empire still I believed that the governors of my Calernian empire must be villains. It

was imperative that I understand how to keep them from turning on each other as well as myself."

I drummed my fingers against the table absent-mindedly as I thought. Villains tended to be more prone to violence, broadly speaking. They also tended to just be worse people than heroes, but that was a weak argument. Most people on Calernia were worse than heroes, by the same measure, and they weren't as prone to infighting as villains. Names did tend to magnify your flaws as well as your virtues, but that was a weak argument as well. Villains weren't all cut from some universal cloth, in either personality or objectives, so the consistent infighting of their alliances couldn't really be traced back to some universal flaw we all shared.

But then that was looking at the individual, when one of my first lessons had been that the system often had the greater impact.

"Villain stories tend to reward conflict and acting decisively," I finally said. "It's an incentive. If it makes you stronger, helps you to win, most people will lean into the traits. When unchecked and become reflexive, that tendency results in poor decisions like backstabbing a nominal ally while heroes are at the gate."

"Squire to the end, I see," Akua murmured, sounding thoughtful. "An interesting answer, and not one I necessarily disagree with. Yet I arrived to a different conclusion myself. I believe that *ambition* is the keystone."

"Not all villains are ambitious," I pointed out. "It's not like every Black Knight eventually made a play for the Tower."

"Ambition can be a nuanced thing," she replied, leaning forward in animation. "A Black Knight's ambition could be to stand the greatest hero-killer of the age, or to lead the Empire to military victory. Rule need not be the driving force of them. Ambition is, to my eye, the seeking of excellence. The nature of that excellence varies with every Named."

There was a refrain of old Praesi pride in there, I thought. The old guard of tyrants had often claimed that they were seekers of excellence, that their philosophy was one of advancement while the Gods Above were enemy of all change. Like most philosophical arguments preached by people who practiced mass human sacrifice and casual assassination, I tended to be skeptical of their claims. If anything it was the Praesi circular circus of usurpation and civil war that was stagnant, whatever the adherents of 'iron sharpens iron' might claim. I didn't entirely disagree with her assertions, though.

"I'll agree that Named tend to be driven people," I conceded. "But I don't buy the rest of that. There's outliers, sure, like

the Tyrant of the Hierarch. But someone like the Harrowed Witch isn't trying to be the best anything – she's trying to not get eaten by the brother she murdered and bound, and maybe trying to move up in the world when there's nothing more pressing."

"She improvised the spell that bound her brother's spirit, highly advanced necromancy, with few resources at hand and no margin of error or time to spare," Akua stated in reply. "One might argue that her ambition is survival in difficult times, and that she has proved highly able in pursuing it."

"Or she was already skilled, and just got desperate and inspired," I replied. "But fine, for the sake of argument let's say I agree with you. Where is this headed?"

"Conflicting excellences are the cause of strife between villains," she said. "Unlike Above's champions, who seek not excellence but a particular outcome, rivalry is natural between us. And given the rewards of violence, as you have put it, villains are more prone to disposing of rivals and obstacles than reach peaceful accords even when these might be more practical. It is why Procer can be the region that has the most villains on Calernia, by simple numbers, but alliances between them are nearly unheard of."

I took me a while to place the expression on her face. She was enjoying this, I realized. The discussion, the debates. I did not let it distract me, or allow my thoughts to meander down the path of who she might have been if she were not the Doom of Liesse.

"Without a common framework keeping us bound," Akua continued, "like the Dread Empire or a greater common ambition in the vein of the League of Rogues and the Iron Kingdoms, villains will nearly always default into competition."

Mhm. The argument somewhat held even when looked at closely, I decided. The infighting in villain alliances tended to crop up when the shared ambition was collapsing, not in the initial string of victories that most villains got to taste before their comeuppance.

"And how did your great Calernian empire propose to get around that flaw?" I asked.

It'd been idle curiosity that made me ask, but suddenly there was a weight to the tent. To this conversation. We had not often talked of the Doom of Liesse, of her plans when she had been the Diabolist. And never this explicitly. She did not openly show hesitation, but her silence and calm face made it plain to me anyway. The golden-eyed shade knew me well, these days, but that blade cut both ways.

"By making more of you," Akua eventually replied. "Client queens and kings that were genuinely invested in the rule of their province, and capable of dominating Named within their realm. So long as my fortress stood, fear of Greater Breaches being opened in retaliation to treachery would have prevented most forms of rebellion – and I believed myself capable of triumphing in the inevitable ensuing shadow wars."

"It was a shit plan," I frankly replied. "You gave yourself a single point of failure and left each of your 'clients' a powerbase to consolidate. The moment the fortress was out, your entire empire would immediately collapse."

"Which was why I intended to build several more," Akua admitted, "once I had the resources of Callow and Praes at my disposal."

I breathed out. Shit. I'd never actually considered that. Would it have worked? No, I eventually decided. The moment she got Malicia and I to surrender, Diabolist would have stood as a beacon for every hero on the continent. I'd had to bend over backwards to avoid that, and she wouldn't have been able to manage while standing atop a fucking doomsday weapon. She'd not last long enough to make a second fortress, or it'd get destroyed while still incomplete. The Diabolist would still have made a horrid mess on the way out, though, possibly afflicting several parts of Calernia with permanent Hellgates before dying. Gods, Second Liesse had been a nightmare but it was still better than... this. I forced myself to think of something else.

"A framework," I evenly said. "The Truce and Terms are one of those, arguably. As is the war against the Dead King."

"The Truce and Terms are and should be considered a construct to help to wage war against Keter," Akua said.

It was quiet, but I could hear the muted relief to her voice. Like we'd both stepped away from a ledge.

"It is the war that has gathered Named," she continued, "and in my opinion it should be considered the 'alliance' within which villains will be jostling for position."

"Jostling only to an extent," I reminded her. "I've avoided a lot of fights by having such a strong position that potential rivals didn't want to take the risk of a challenge."

More than a few villains coveted my seat as our representative under the Truce and Terms but they were also aware that I had an army, Named allies and the Kingdom of Callow's power backing me. It wasn't full-proof, of course. Some had tried to take that swing anyway, unable to deal with being the second in anything. The Red Reaver had been one, and I'd made an example of him. Others, like the Barrow Sword, had picked a fight to test my

strength and then fallen in line almost amicably when I'd proven I was not to be trifled with.

"Several sources of your current influence are temporary," Akua pointed out. "Your position as representative, your queenship over Callow, your positional advantage within the Grand Alliance. They can serve as a defensive asset, prevent others from striking at you, but they should not be confused for a way to make people listen to you. If you want obedience of the villains you have gathered here, and for them to bind themselves to your Accords, you must find a way to help their own ambitions within the frame of your own greater one."

I did not immediately reply. As it happened, I was not under the illusion that my current influence among my kind would carry beyond the war against Keter. I was in a unique position at the moment but sooner or later the stars would fall out of alignment and my authority would wane. For now, though, I still had it. And I fully intended to use it as much to carry out the war as to prepare the peace that'd follow it. Akua was still thinking of this as a warlord would, though or perhaps a Dread Empress – like a centerpiece binding important assets to her by giving them what they wanted, and pairing that fulfillment to service.

But I couldn't think like that, not if I wanted my work to survive me. If I wanted villains to embrace the Liesse Accords, that meant convincing them that submitting to some rules was worth the benefits the submission would earn them.

"Turning wolves into wolfhounds," I mused.

"One piece of meat at a time," Akua Sahelian softly agreed.

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The morning's war council yielded no surprises. The Iron Prince and I would hold command of the two offensives, and General Pallas broad authority but not actual command over the reserves. I'd wasted no time in politely requesting of Princess Beatrice of Hainaut, freshly under my command, that she 'make suggestions' about the fantassins companies that would best suit our needs. I made it clear I wasn't trying to leave Klaus Papenheim with only dregs, but that she shouldn't feel shy about taking the better cut either. She was amenable to the request, and gave the impression she was amenable to my being in command period. I had hopes of a good working relationship.

Mind you, she was an Alamans of royal blood. I fully expected she'd be able to put a smile on surrendering to Malicia.

With that settled, I turned to the looming matter of the council of villains. The hill Akua had told me of turned out to be more than serviceable, and so we went ahead with using it. The firepit

was cleaned and deepened, then ten high seats brought out in a broad circle – Hakram would not need one, bringing his own. Seating would be assigned, I'd decided, to avoid chaos breaking out immediately instead of eventually. I considered the known tapestry of grudges in silence, looking at the seats. The Barrow Sword and Headhunter couldn't be too close without fingers being lost so I put the fire between them, and leaving the Summoner by either the Beastmaster or the Berserker was a recipe for a snide comment preceding bloodspill so they'd have to be split up.

Hakram on my left and Indrani on my right was only to be expected, but the seat to their sides would be taken as signs of favour so I had to be careful who got them. The Rapacious Troubadour would have to get the seat by Archer, I thought. I'd left him to handle Named-finding out here with little prior warning and he'd done well, so it was owed. It would be the Berserker by Adjutant's side, though, I eventually decided. She was fresh to Hainaut, and I'd only met her the once before leaving – just long enough to send her beyond the trenches to hunt with the Silver Huntress – but during my absence she'd apparently killed a Revenant and wounded another, which merited encouragement.

That made five seats settled, and I leaned on my staff as I worried my lip and considered the rest.

"Where do you intend to place the Headhunter?" Akua asked.

I did not glance back, having known she wasn't far. I would have brought Hakram as well, but he wasn't exactly in a state to make the trip quickly. Indrani was currently sleeping, having travelled a full day and night over the last stretch to get here in time, so of my inner circle it was only the two of us here.

"Between Berserker and Beastmaster, I think," I said.

The Levantine villain wouldn't be able to easily mess with either, considering neither was a slouch up close or a stranger to violence. She nodded, eyes pensive.

"Barrow Sword by the Rapacious Troubadour?" she suggested.

I hummed. Ishaq tended to get along with people who weren't of the Blood – or whose savagery he did not consider to be damaging his own chances of becoming one of the Blood, namely the Headhunter – so I was actually wary of placing him too early. He was valuable because of that relative lack of enmities. Still, he had to sit *somewhere*.

"Then Concocter by him," I said.

'Cocky' was both sharp-tongued and not physically powerful, so I had to be wary of where I placed her. If she mouthed off to the

Berserker she was liable to lose a few teeth, not to mention the bloody scalp the Headhunter would be after. The Concocter would likely have pockets full of poison, I further considered, so if she retaliated the escalation would be steep and immediate. Best to avoid the trouble entirely by giving her mild-mannered neighbours.

"Summoner by her," Akua said. "He will enjoy word of the Arsenal, no?"

The man was still miffed he'd been assigned as a combat sorcerer instead of a researcher, as I recalled, but he'd never hidden his continuing fascination for the Arsenal. It was a good pick. With a little luck he might even be too busy talking to her to insult anyone else for at least *part* of this council.

"Agreed," I grunted. "Which would leave the Harrowed Witch between Summoner and Beastmaster."

"She was in Archer's service for some time," Akua noted. "That should ensure civility of the Beastmaster."

Or encourage him to lash out at the Witch as indirect vengeance on Indrani, I thought, since her connections made her very risky to take swing at these days. It'd not escaped me that Archer's fellow pupils under the Lady of the Lake did not have the fondest memories of their time together, though Beastmaster had always struck me as indifferent where the Silver Huntress and the Concocter had been venomous. It was a measured risk, I decided. The worst the Summoner would send the Witch's way was likely to be a few snide words about hedge wizardry, and I trusted her to be able to ignore that. She'd struck me as being steady of temperament, back in the Arsenal.

"It will do," I said.

My gaze swept over the seats. It would have to. Soon enough we would be going to war, and I wanted every sac of venom emptied before we were on the march.

Interlude: Reprobates

"And so Dread Emperor Irritant did shout thus: 'Leave him to me!' And then he did ignore the Knight Errant, and brawled with a common soldier instead, and triumphed over him."

Extract from Volume IX of the official Imperial Chronicles

He'd been among the first few to arrive after the Black Queen and her attending pair, so the high seats were still largely empty,

yet he was not disappointed in the slightest. Instead Lucien Travers, who some knew as the Rapacious Troubadour – though he personally left the epithet out of the introduction unless pressed – studied those empty seats circling the crown of the hill with great interest.

Many of his fellow Damned would not spare a look for the arrangements beyond learning where their seat had been placed, but Lucien would not make that mistake. The Rapacious Troubadour knew himself a feeble enough sort compared to many among his kind, and so it behooved him to always consider the undercurrents of the situations he involved himself in. Lucien was all too aware that his skill with the sword was no match for the likes of the Red Knight, or his dabbling in sorcery more than a pittance compared to the arcane powers of a man like the Hierophant. He'd always been a man of scattered interests, and so while his learning was broad it might be said to be comparatively shallow.

It was his eyes he'd paid for with his travels, his ability to read a room and the underpinnings of it.

Some arrangements were only to be expected. The mark of favour he'd earned through his labours in Hainaut, the seat by the Archer's own, was one such. The Black Queen was not shy in offering honours to those that served her purposes well, so long as they played by her rules as well. The rumoured red hate between the Headhunter and the Barrow Sword had led to them being split apart, and the Troubadour was amused to see that the Summoner had been neatly contained between two scholarly sorts. Dear Cedric did have a sharp tongue, it must be admitted. That his Callowan ancestry had failed to bring about favoritism at his advantage remained a frustration to the wizard.

It was the layer beyond the obvious that was interesting. Once it was grasped who their common shepherd saw as the individuals in need of containment, from their surroundings it could be deduced who she saw as reliable – the true favoured, not those merely honoured in public. The Concocter and the Harrowed Witch, it seemed. Both of which had ties to the Archer. Ah, how he admired the Black Queen's cleverness in expanding her influence: if she'd gathered attendants herself it would have had the Chosen up in arms, but who would suspect the *Archer*? The Beastmaster was still out of favour, which was pleasing, but the Berserker's placement was what drew his attention.

She was fresh blood, and her seat of honour not unexpected given her record against Revenants, but that was mere window dressed. She has been seated by the Adjutant, who was now a mere crippled shadow of his old self. A test of restraint, perhaps, of attitude? It would pair nicely with having given her the notoriously unpleasant Headhunter as a neighbour on the other side. The Berserker might just be undergoing an audition for

greater trust and responsibility, Lucien mused. That made her someone worth keeping an eye on.

The Rapacious Troubadour strolled to the highest of seats, the Black Queen's own, approaching under the calm, cool stare of the greatest villain of the age. Two great crows were perched above her shoulders, their feathers as if woven from shadow. The slight tension at the knowledge he was occupying the full attention of the same woman who'd been the architect of both the Princes' Graveyard and the Salian Peace was delicious, for all that the fear behind it was genuine. Lucien was not a man who'd been born for dull times, for pedestrian appetites or the safety of righteous choices. What worth was life, if not lived on the razor's edge? He swept back his long hair as he offered a deep bow.

"Your Majesty," the Troubadour smiled. "It is ever a pleasure to be in your presence."

"Rapacious Troubadour," the Black Queen replied as she cocked her head to the side, her Chantant easy and lightly accented. "You seem in a pleasant mood. Finally back in familiar waters, yes?"

Seen through already? He'd been in too fine a mood, it seemed. Gods but how delicious it would be to have but the slightest taste of such a soul, barely more than a nibble really – Lucien felt the attention on him, and turned to meet the Archer's unblinking gaze. The sharp-faced woman offered him a lazy grin, all the while idly tapping the side of a knife against a finger. He doubted that grin would waver in the slightest as she slit his throat. Ah, he'd ben forgetting himself.

"Who would dare claim familiarity as such a gathering, Black Queen?" Lucien smiled. "I am simply looking forward to the night's festivities."

—

The Berserker did not know how to read. Had the servants not told her where her seat was she wouldn't have known, and she thought she saw a mocking glint in the man's eye. Her fist was already clenching when she remembered who was looking at her, that small woman on the seat with the huge dark crows and the dead wood staff. Temper, Zoe reminded herself. There would be better fights to pick tonight than some mouthy nobody. She dropped into her seat, sending for ale. The sooner they got to grievances, the sooner she could crack her knuckles on some fucker's jaw.

—

The Summoner's lips thinned in anger. He was not late, he *wasn't*, but everyone else had come early and so he'd been made to look in the wrong. Again. Just another injustice in the long line of them

forced onto Cedric Ackland. He never got his dues, always got cheated of what was rightfully his. He gathered his robes and hastened up the hill onto the last empty seat, between a disturbingly silver-haired woman and that idiot peasant who'd cursed herself with her own brother's ghost.

"Is he always that slow?"

The Summoner turned a glare onto the person who'd spoken. Some ruffian in cuirass and cloth, with knotted brown hair freed from an ornate spiked helmet and three leathery heads hanging from their belt. The Headhunter, he realized with distaste. Their reputation preceded them.

"Silence is preferable to empty words," the Summoner sneered back. "A lesson you ought to learn."

The savage – only now did he realize the brown lines sliding down the edge of their hair were brown paint and not dirt – laughed, reaching for one of the dozen knives and hatchets at their side.

"Insult was given twice, once for lateness and once by wagging tongue," the Headhunter said. "I will collect on your behalf, Black Queen."

Cedric's magic roiled at his fingertips. The things he was going to unleash to discipline that wretch would... his anger was interrupted by a slight sound, fingers being drummed on a wooden seat's arm. The Black Queen was studying the Headhunter with a mildly bored and irritated look on her face, as if displeased by the noise someone's dog was making.

"And who are you to me, Headhunter, to be collecting anything on my behalf?" the Queen of Callow softly asked.

The savage's cheeks reddened and the Summoner grinned. Finally he got the support he was due by virtue of his Callowan blood. Has his own father not once been a lord under the Fairfaxes? Cedric should have a seat at her inner circle and his pick of assignments, not this mere pittance, but it was a start.

"I only meant-"

"We know exactly what you meant to do, Headhunter," the Archer smiled. "So shut the fuck up, yeah? Before we decide it's worth taking issue with."

The Levantine prick rose in anger, baring a long knife and reaching for a rope.

"I will not be threatened by the likes of you," the Headhunter barked. "A hound gone tame-"

"Sit down," the Black Queen said.

The Headhunter turned their gaze to her and hesitated.

"Sit down," Catherine Foundling mildly said, "before I *make* you sit down."

They swallowed their pride and did.

Perhaps there had been advantages to have arrived last after all, Cedric decided as he smugly settled into his seat.

—

The Barrow Sword silently cursed.

The Headhunter hadn't been enough of an idiot to get himself — for the shape of the face paint told Ishaq they were a him, at the moment — killed to make an example, or at least crippled, which was a damned shame. It meant the old dogs in the Majilis would still be able to point at the Headhunter and then wag their finger disapprovingly at the bloodlust of those Bestowed by Below, helpfully ignoring anything the Barrow Sword himself had ever done in favour of tossing them all in the same cauldron to boil. There just weren't enough of them that weren't head-cutting lunatics for the Blood to hesitate at crossing them, to his continuing frustration.

The Marauder was a lot more careful than her Bestowal would imply but she'd still killed an Osenia — on behalf of the Bandit's Blood, she said, but it couldn't be proven — so she was easy to dismiss, and the Grave Binder was both reasonable and amenable but also... less than personable. The smell of living rot could be off-putting, not that Ishaq was one to judge for the consequences of going barrow-raiding. The closeness of the Bestowal to that of the Binder's Blood had also triggered harsh enmity from the Tanja, who considered it a desecration of sorts, but they'd not dared push the enmity too far when their young lord was so close to the Black Queen.

The Foundling Queen was known for keeping to a hard sort of honour, after all, and she was not one to lightly cross. She was also beginning to speak, so Ishaq set aside the thoughts and pricked his ear.

"There's only been a few times in the history of Calernia," the Black Queen said, "where so many of our kind have gathered. Consider that, before we begin addressing grievances. Remember that the last time so many villains were gathered around the same firepit, nations trembled."

Ishaq grinned, watching the dark-haired queen closely as she spoke. All knew that the Queen of Callow had been the one to tame the lord and the princes, to force the hand of the Peregrine and the Sword of Judgement, and so the achievement she called eyes on

reflected glory onto her. *You sit here fat and safe instead of hunted because of me*, she was reminding them. That dangerous little bastard the Rapacious Troubadour was leaning forward on his seat to Ishaq's right, as if getting closer would let him get his paws on the soul of the villainess, but he was hardly alone in that. The Black Queen had a fine speaking voice, and a reputation that demanded attention.

"There's enough skill and power assembled here tonight to topple a kingdom," the Black Queen said, a hard smile touching her lips. "That it has been not been enough to break the Dead King over our knee should serve as a reminder of what still lies ahead of us."

"War on Keter," the Archer called out, baring her teeth.

Ishaq laughed and joined his call to hers, as did half a dozen more. The shouting would buy him time enough to figure out how to bury the Headhunter all the way to his neck instead of merely his knees.

—

The Beastmaster eyed the great shadow-crows again, biting his cheek in irritation.

Their form, the power he could feel pulsing within them, it all called to him. Yet Lysander had found that he could not **Master** them, not even the slightest bit. His power was no immediate yoke, taking time and skill to settle properly into the beasts of his menagerie, but when he used it there was always a... bite. Not here, though. He had heard it said that the crows were shards of drow goddesses, not true living creatures, but he'd not truly believed it until now. Wild gods sometimes touched animals with their power, remaking them into something more without fundamentally changing their essence, so he'd expected this to be case here.

Not so, it turned out, and now the shadowy things had turned their black eyes on him. Had they noticed? He could not tell, but caution was in order. This was not the Woods, where he knew the paths and dangers. Boldness had to be measured, lest it cost him more than he was willing to give. The Beastmaster drank from the ale horn the servants had passed him, wiping his mouth afterwards and listening without much interest as the parade of grievances began.

"- deferred to her even though she is fresh to the front, and I was in command," the Summoner whined. "There must be punishment for this."

Gods, Lysander thought, *what a useless prick*. His dislike for the man had grown stronger with every comparison between them. The Beastmaster brought servants to the fight as well, but unlike the

mageling he wasn't useless if someone got to him – he fought *with* his menagerie, not *behind* it.

"Are you," the Barrow Sword said, tone slightly disbelieving, "complaining about Dominion warriors deferring to the *Valiant Champion*?"

The Beastmaster grunted in amusement. Ishaq had a good head and a better swordhand, a respectable man. Too close to the Black Queen's party for comfort, but without having turned into a minion.

"I held command," the Summoner insisted.

"No one who has to say that holds anything," the Headhunter dismissed.

There was a murmur of agreement around the fire. The Headhunter wasn't liked – no one wanted to ally with someone who'd stick you in the back for your head and a shadow of your power – but he wasn't wrong. Lysander glanced at the Black Queen, who was lounging on her throne and idly sipping at a cup of wine. She seemed less than impressed.

"What's your exact grievance under the Terms?" the Queen of Callow asked.

"It was disrespect," the Summoner angrily replied. "Against the Terms."

"Disrespect is not against our laws," the Black Queen said. "Were your orders disobeyed or contradicted?"

The Beastmaster chuckled under his breath, as all here knew the answer to that. The Summoner went on to bluster for a bit before it became clear the villainess patience had been exhausted. She glanced at Indrani, who cleared her throat loudly and called for the next grievance to be spoken. Lysander's eyes narrowed at the sight. He wasn't Alexis, to rage at the sight of that or even Indrani at all, but it was still hard to believe Archer had bound herself to others in such a way. The Beastmaster had long believed that Alexis might have inherited the Lady's thirst for challenges but that it was Indrani who'd learned their teacher's restlessness, her wanderlust. It was a belief difficult to pair with the reality of her serving as the Black Queen's enforced, and it had done much to unravel the respect he'd once held for Indrani.

"I have a grievance," the Concocter spoke up.

Lysander's brow rose in interest. Cocky was not one to dip her toe into these things without reason, so this ought to be interesting at last.

"Did you lose a cauldron?" the Headhunter jeered. "It's not like you know how to use anything else."

The Beastmaster's knife came down on the arm of his chair, blade biting into wood with a hard thunk, and the Levantine's own hand twitched towards his blade as he turned to match eyes. Lysander shrugged.

"My hand slipped," the Beastmaster shrugged.

Fucking Dominion shithead. Lysander wasn't some sentimental pissant, but there were lines. Cocky was a lot more useful to have around than a second-rate tracker who used an aspect to make up for lack of skill.

—

The Harrowed Witch winced.

Merciless Gods, why did all these people have to be so violent? Julien's shade muttered angrily in her ear, his half-heard imprecations rather distracting, but she focused. If this turned into a brawl, she'd throw herself backwards and flee under cover of illusion – the latter part of which would take some concentration. Although, she thought, it was not the Archer who led here but her own mistress. Unlike Lady Indrani, who enjoyed a spot of mayhem between 'comrades', the Black Queen was known for her stern disposition and sharp tongue. Perhaps she'd take this all in hand.

"Your grievance, Concocter?" the Queen of Callow asked.

That bear of a man, the Beastmaster, ceased glaring at the Headhunter and they returned the favour. Both pretended nothing had ever taken place between them. Sweet Providence but Aspasia had lucked out with her seat, having the rough woodsman between her and the Headhunter. Even Julien's shade avoided getting too close to that one.

"I have had supplies brought in from the Arsenal," the Concocter said. "And twice now the crates have been opened and inspected by Proceran soldiers before being passed on to me."

Aspasia felt it more than she saw it. Like the weight in the air before a storm, a pressure had gathered atop the hill. The fire dimmed and breaths came shorter as the Black Queen straightened from a lazy sprawl to sharp-eyed alertness. The Witch had seen it once before in the Arsenal, the subtle metamorphosis that turned a mouthy young woman into the Arch-heretic of the East. It was all in the way she held herself, in the intensity of her. The roiling power around them that had them all shuffling uncomfortably in their seats, those dark eyes – almost black, in

the evening light – growing cold with displeasure at what she had heard.

“Those crates, had they been inspected and sealed in the Arsenal?” the Black Queen asked in a clipped tone.

“Yes,” the Concocter replied, tone admirably steady.

“You will pass on descriptions of those soldiers to Adjutant,” the dark-eyed queen said, drumming her fingers against the arm of her seat. “They will be swinging from gallows by dawn, and your supplies will never be touched again.”

Aspasie shivered, for she did not doubt the other woman’s word in the slightest.

—

The Rapacious Troubadour weighed his options.

While he’d be most pleased by a greater monthly supply of Binds to take from – their souls were ancient but worn, tasteless and colourless – he doubted that the Black Queen would be amenable to the request. She’d never hidden her distaste for his inclinations, and she’d been quite blunt in warning him of the costs of returning to his old practices. A restriction that he chafed under, even knowing it was only temporary. Still, Lucien was not an unreasonable man and he knew that the Terms and their looming successor, the Liesse Accords, were much to his advantage.

He thrived in society, when navigating hierarchies, and the Black Queen’s ambitions would herald the creation of a society of the Damned. The sheer *potential* of that had him giddy, sometimes. So long as he was able to limit his predations to victims deemed acceptable under the rules, heroes would have no real call to hunt him and he’d even be able to move through the civilized world without fear of being hunted. No, the prize was well worth a few years of lean and tasteless pickings. He ate more than enough to avoid desiccation, and he’d begun to pick out the people that would be of use after the war.

Gluttony would not help him here. It’d be much more useful to earn a favour or two from his fellows, and he had just the trick for that. One need not be brilliant to realize that the Berserker was itching for a fight, and she was not so thuggish as to fail to understand when she was being helped. It’d give him an in with the Barrow Sword as well, if he played it well.

“I have a grievance as well, if we are to clear the air,” Lucien drawled.

Rather obvious bait, but given the precedents...

"A bard insists on speaking," the Headhunter snorted. "There's a surprise."

Like a fish on a hook.

"This," the Troubadour airily said. "This is my issue, Black Queen. The constant pricking from the prick, so to speak. Can they not be disciplined into a semblance of politeness?"

The Foundling Queen eyed him for a moment, and Lucien felt naked. As if seen through once more. It was exhilarating, in a terrifying sort of way.

"I'm not here to hold your hands," the Black Queen acidly said. "Petty disputes are not breaches of the Terms, they are yours to resolve."

"Ha!" the Headhunter sneered, "You-"

Lucien discreetly winked at the Berserker, whose flat face and broken nose split into a brutally gleeful grin as she grasped the chance she'd just been given. A heartbeat later the Headhunter's jaw popped with a beautiful sound as the Berserker's knuckles smashed into it, the seats of the two warriors toppling as they brawled.

—

That Troubadour was a useful sort for a fucking singer, Zoe approvingly thought as she let out a hoarse shout and smashed the Headhunter's head through the seat even as they slipped a knife into her ribs. She'd remember the good turn and return it in kind. As she was thrown off by the Headhunter the Berserker felt her back begin to crack as the Haze seeped into her, shuddering into her limbs as the strength and anger hardened her muscles.

The Headhunter got to their feet again, as did she, and Zoe ripped out the knife in her side before letting out a blood-curling scream. *Finally* she could cut loose and just **Rage**.

—

The Barrow Sword turned to study the man sitting by his side, a dark-haired sort with insolent good looks and slightly crooked fingers. The cithern strapped to his back seemed as natural to him as the sword on his hip, and though the Rapacious Troubadour did not have the reputation of a great swordsman, there were many kinds of battles. The way the Berserker was spasming wildly and turning red even as the Headhunter stuck her full of knives and hatches to little avail made the point plainly enough.

"Have you ever been to the Dominion, Lucien?" Ishaq casually asked.

"I've not had the pleasure," the other man replied with a slender smile.

"You should visit, one of these days," the Barrow Sword said. "I'm sure you'd find much there to your liking."

If he could not find enough allies within Bestowed of Levant, Ishaq thought, then perhaps it was time to broaden his horizons.

—

The Summoner laughed at the brawling fools, voice high and mocking. The Headhunter had been thoroughly obnoxious and the Berserker was a rude thug, so he had no horse in this race. Let them smash each other to pieces, for all he cared. His mood significantly improved, he offered a charming smile to the silver-haired woman at his side. The Concocter, she was called. She'd taken his rightful place in the Arsenal — her or one of her *colleagues* — but Cedric was willing to set that aside for the sake of polite conversation.

"I am told you have spent much of your time in the Arsenal," the Summoner said.

Her eyes, he only noticed then, were not of the same colour. One was silver, the other blue. It was disturbing to behold, though he was well-bred enough not to comment on this.

"I have," the Concocter said. "And I am told you sought admission there yourself?"

He grit his teeth.

"Mere rumours," Cedric dismissed. "My talents as a war mage are too precious to squander, I've always known this."

"Are they?" the Concocter said. "I have not been told of the shape of your Gift in any detail."

Was she doubting him? Cedric scowled. A demonstration was in order, then. Hand rising, he seized the threads of his sorcery and pulled out one of his lesser summons. He might as well force apart the two brawling idiots while he was at it, and establish his skills for all to see.

"Come forth," the Summoner intoned.

—

Merde, Aspasia thought.

Magic to her right and a violent death match to her left: the Harrowed Witch had no intention of staying in the middle of this. She tipped back her seat until it fell and crouched behind it,

just in time to see some sort of leonine creature in a shimmering ghostly glow leap out of blue circle hanging in the air. The summon would have tackled the Berserker – now red-veined, hulking and screaming – from the back if a sinuous thing had not suddenly struck at it in midair, sinking fangs into its flank. It shimmered out of existence. A snake, Aspasia realized. The Beastmaster had hidden the largest snake she'd ever seen under his furs, and it'd attacked the leaping summon without hesitation.

"You trifling sneak," the Summoner snarled.

The snake, striped and sinuous and looking all too smart for such a creature, retreated and loosely coiled around the Beastmaster's neck.

"Say that again," the large man challenged. "See what happens."

At the bottom of the hill, Aspasia felt creatures begin to stir. The Harrowed Witch began to weave the strands around her, ignoring the furious wails of her brother's shade even as she drew on the essence of his death to hide her existence. The two who'd begun brawling, the Headhunter and the Berserker, had almost tumbled off the edge of the hill. Though the Berserker had clearly hurt the other villain, punching in a rib, the Headhunter had sunk over a dozen blades in their opponent's flesh. Even now they were trying to tie the villainess limbs with some sort of rope, though the Berserker's strange spasms made it difficult to achieve.

Something was slithering along the grass atop the hill and for a moment Aspasia thought it was yet another snake, but in the heartbeat that followed strings of shadow shot up. They latched onto the Headhunter, who jerked in surprise and tried to rip away their hand only to find that the string moved with them. Yet it tightened, after, almost like taffy. Within heartbeats the Dominion prick was covered in shadowy strings and vainly struggling on the ground, mouth covered. The Berserker milled about uncertainly, then let out a furious scream and turned towards the nearest target: the Adjutant. The crippled orc in his wheelchair did not so much as bat an eye while on the ground under the Berserker a shimmer passed. The Witch caught a glimpse of something and the Berserker was *gone*. As if fallen into the ground.

Dusk had arrived, Aspasia saw. The world was dimming. And nowhere was it darker than around the Black Queen on her throne, looking bored as she rested her chin on her palm and watched them all.

"Summoner," the Black Queen idly said. "Beastmaster. The two of you appear to have left your seats, no doubt by mistake."

The magic that had been sharpening the air with the smell of ozone winked out. The creeping creatures that had been making their way up the hill froze, then withdrew. The Beastmaster offered a jerky nod and slumped back onto his seat: the snake disappeared under his furs, as if it'd never been there at all.

"Your Majesty-" the Summoner began.

There was a sound like a rope being tightened, and the Headhunter hoarsely screamed.

"I dislike," Catherine Foundling said, "repeating myself."

The Summoner sat down. The Harrowed Witch dragged her seat back up and sat down on it, hoping no one had taken notice.

-

The Black Queen had seen through him.

The thought struck the Rapacious Troubadour and would not leave him even as he studied the Headhunter's futile struggles against the shadow bindings. Her putdowns had been too smooth, too perfect. The gate beneath the Berserker had already been woven, just left dormant. She'd known Lucien was going to incite a brawl and let him, so that she might use the erupting chaos to her own purposes. What these purposes were he did not know, but he was hungry to find out. If she'd planned it all ahead this far... A dangerous woman, this orphan queen. She'd played the oldest living hero of Calernia like a fiddle, it was said, and so far they were faring no better against her wiles.

A dragonbone pipe in hand, she leaned to the side so that the Adjutant might strike a match and light it for her. Taking a deep breath, silence falling among them as she did, the Queen of Callow spat out a long stream of smoke. She flicked a wrist. A slit opened in the air to the side of the hill and the Berserker came out screaming, hitting the ground as if she'd been thrown down from a cliff instead. There was a crack of broken bones and the villainess ceased moving. Not dead, he thought, but her legs had broken even with all the power of her rage strengthening her.

"Archer," the Black Queen said, "drag that enthusiastic young woman back to her seat. I still have a use for her."

The tall villainess rose to her feet with a lazy grin.

"Nothing like two broken legs to put things into perspective, I've found," the Archer mused.

The Berserker was dragged by the crook of her neck, hair gone wild and looking in a great deal of pain but not entirely displeased with the way her evening had gone regardless. Shadow

strings dragged the Headhunter back onto the wreck of their seat, and only then left withdrew. The armoured villain cast wild-eyed looks all around, as if trying to find where the strings had gone, and their breathing was unsteady. It'd escaped absolutely no one's notice that it would have been trivial for the Black Queen to snap their neck, if she'd felt like it.

"I find myself disappointed in you all," the Queen of Callow slowly said, trails of smoke curling up above her. "The information's there to be found, I made sure of it, so it must mean that not a single one of you thought to look."

The Archer leaned back in her seat, looking amused. The Adjutant remained the same mirror he always was, unreadable. Lucien watched the others, but found only puzzlement and veiled faces. No one was quite sure what she meant, then. Good, he'd not been left behind.

"How many villains have signed onto the Truce and Terms?" the Black Queen asked. "Does a single one of you know?"

Lucien hid a frown, counting silently. At least twenty, he thought, but he was uncertain of the numbers in Cleves so it was likely higher. Besides, had the First Prince not taken one of the Damned as an adviser? She had kept this quiet, but not so quiet the likes of the Troubadour could not find word of it.

"Twenty eight," the Adjutant said, his voice like rough gravel.

The Troubadour blinked in surprise. Was this true? It seemed...

"Some of you are putting it together, I see," the Black Queen thinly smiled, eyes passing over him and then to his surprise onto the Headhunter. "There are seventy-four Named who have signed onto the Terms, you see."

Less than half. Lucien would admit he was surprised. He'd expected, if not quite even halves, then at least something close to it. This was sharply imbalanced in their disfavour.

"And what is that to us, Black Queen?" the Beastmaster replied.

"Look around you," she replied. "Then think of the heroes and their own firepit. How, unlike you, they are *making allies*."

—

"Let them hold hands," the Headhunter dismissed. "It will not save them when the night gets dark."

The Barrow Sword almost laughed, for as usual Saidi was missing the point. All that power, all that skill, but not a bushel of wits to go with them. When the war on Keter ended, things would not return to what they had once been. That was what the Queen of

Callow was telling them. How many of these Bestowed by Above would have met, if not for this war? Now they knew names and faces, had struck friendships and alliances. When the war ended, when the truce came at an end, the heroes would prowl in *packs*. Magelings from Ashur allied with duellists from Procer, priests from the Free Cities with the Blood of Levant. They would be fighting an enemy that had learned, that had grown, that was *ready for them*.

"You warn us of annihilation," Ishaq bluntly said.

—

"Petty alarmism," the Summoner said. "They cannot turn on us after we carried the war against Procer. It would be dishonourable."

The Harrowed Witch swallowed a hysterical giggle. They were going to bet their lives on *honour*? The man was blind. She'd not thought it before, but the Black Queen was right. They must come to terms with the Chosen, or perhaps band with a few others for protection. If they were too many to be easily slain, or perhaps hidden...

"The Grey Pilgrim would poison every single one of you and lose not a wink of sleep over it," the Barrow Sword flatly replied. "We all know what the years before the Uncivil Wars were like. The Peregrine and the Saint, picking every flower before it could bloom. They'll do the same now, only with bands and training and coin."

—

"There's no need to fight them," the Beastmaster said.

And meant it, too. Lysander saw no need to spill hero blood, or have his own spilled by them. What did they have to fight over? Let them keep their cities and their temples, his own home was far beyond their reach.

"We can keep to our places, and they to theirs," the Beastmaster said.

"And so we go back living in a fucking hovel in the woods?" Cocky said.

He blinked in surprised. Had her years in the Arsenal truly softened her so much, *weakened* her so much?

"They'll keep it all," the Concocter warned. "The Arsenal, the secrets and the libraries and the wonders we made. If we disperse back into the wilds, after the war, then they keep the world and we exile ourselves to the fringes."

"The Accords ensure they cannot simply hunt us," Lysander sharply reminded her.

"You depend on *ink* for safety, now?" Cocky replied just as sharply.

—

"The Accords don't say we can't fight," the Berserker said. "They only say *how* we can't. They'll come for us, Beastmaster."

Zoe would never have considered signing them, if they did. It was a pack of rules about how violence could be done, and much about magic, but the only parts that concerned her were no different from duelling rules. She could stomach that.

"She's right," the Headhunter said, to her surprise. "There are some among them who will want to hunt. They'll follow us, wait for an excuse."

"And they'll have backers in the courts," the Rapacious Troubadour added. "Nobles behind them, soldiers and safe places. We all know the Mirror Knight was in bed with the House of Langevin, and he won't be the last."

Fucking nobles, Zoe thought, anger welling up. With their tricks and their lies and their... biting into her lips, she forced herself to push down the rage. The Black Queen was likely to do more than just break her legs, next time.

—

"They know who we are, now," Ishaq said. "Don't forget that. They know our names, where we rose to power. They will know where to look for us."

That struck home with more than a few, he saw on their faces. It was a dreadful thing that'd been revealed to them, the Barrow Sword thought, but it was also an opportunity. There were some here who would make useful allies, and to who he would be of use in turn. Bargains could be had, favours traded.

"It's worse than that," the Concocter flatly said, pushing back her silver hair. "Think of the weapons the Arsenal has been able to make in just a few years. They have the numbers and the coin to keep making such things, greater ones. What do we have, a handful of forges and libraries dispersed across half the continent? How many of us even have a roof to sleep under?"

Ashen Gods, Ishaq thought. A grim truth, that. He had territory in the Brocelian, but it was only his so long as no other Bestowed came to take it from him. He looked at the three on the other side of the fire, the dark-eyed queen and her hands on each

side – the fang and the steel, waiting and silent and expectant. They had known all this from the start. Where this would lead them. The Black Queen was waiting for them at the end of this road.

“You have shown us a doom, Black Queen,” Ishaq said. “Will you also show us how to avert it?”

—

Lucien leaned forward, eyes alight. Now was the time for the reveal, he thought.

“After the war, under my auspices a hall will be founded in Cardinal,” the Black Queen idly said. “It will have workshops and armories, libraries and artefacts. Its doors will be open to any of Below’s who sign the Liesse Accords and agree to a few additional... rules of engagement.”

The Summoner began to speak, but the Archer’s black glare silence him.

“This hall will also offer its services as intermediary between all who belong to it,” the Queen of Callow said. “Should they seek allies within our kind, or to trade favours. It would serve as guarantor of any such deal made, naturally.”

And so enable the making of alliances through the threat of the Black Queen herself taking offence at the breaking of a pact made under her auspices, the Troubadour thought. He could not resist, letting out a soft peal of laughter. This would not disappear all their troubles, but it would give them the tools to solve them by their own hands. And all it would require of them was to follow the Black Queen’s rules, to heed her Accords so that they might all reap the benefits of her peace.

All hail the queen, Lucien Travers amusedly thought.

“I might be interested in such an arrangement,” the Troubadour said.

—

It could be of use, the Summoner thought. Since the Arsenal was barred to him, and likely to remain so...

—

If nothing else it would make the trading of favours a more reliable thing, Lysander admitted to himself.

—

Word of who to hunt, and who to avoid, the Headhunter thought. Always the hardest of knowledge to gather. It would depend on these rules, but as things stood...

—

The Concocter would have opened a newborn for what was being offered, what were a few damned rules to her?

—

The Berserker frowned. More rules. Not pleasant to hear, but if this let her avoid being hunted by the White Knight after the war she would have to consider it.

—

It would let her find another band, the Harrowed Witch realized with a sigh of relief. Safety in numbers, with a powerful patroness behind them.

—

"Oh yes," the Barrow Sword grinned, all sharp teeth bared. "This would be of interest to me as well."

—

As the pieces fell into place Catherine Foundling blew out a stream of grey smoke, and smiled a devil's smile.

Chapter 47: Methods

"A plan of war is the inevitable victim of circumstance; methods of war are superior, for they are the mother of many a plan."

Extract from the 'Ars Tactica', famed military treatise of Dread Emperor Terribilis the First

Seventeen fantassins from three different companies hung from nooses, the wind making them swing slightly as the sun rose. *Bloody fools*, I thought at the sight of them, not a single speck of sympathy emerging even at this late hour. The lot of them had been from three middling companies, not one of them numbering a thousand men and each of them with several cases of corruption on their record. It'd not been difficult to track them with what the Concocter had told us, not once Adjutant put his army of helpful hands to the task. Names were obtained within the first bell, though I had to send in armed companies to make the arrests as the mercenaries were reluctant to give up their own.

Interrogations had been brisk, and hadn't even required much coercion. The idiots hadn't known they were trying to rob shipments earmarked for a Named, they'd thought they were just skimming Arsenal equipment. The part that'd infuriated me was when I'd realized that guards had been bribed for the fantassins to get access, and some of those had been mine. Two Callowan legionaries were being flogged as we spoke for trading shifts without officer permission, and the Third Army had lost a sergeant when it turned out she'd been in on it from the start. I'd let her captain handle the discipline, but I did not need to look to know she'd be hanging from our own gallows about now.

The regulations were crystal clear.

"I do not question the justice of this, Your Majesty," Princess Beatrice said, "but it will not help relations with the companies."

The Princess of Hainaut was a better rider than me, though given Zombie's undead placidity an outside observer would have found it hard to tell when we weren't moving. I'd not expected that when I first met her, as Beatrice Volignac was also very much overweight. My people did tend to look down on those wasteful enough to grow fat, but I'd since revised that first opinion of her: while I didn't share Prince Klaus' high opinion of her as a general, it couldn't be denied she was a fine lance and probably the finest cavalry commander in Hainaut. She was also my intermediary with Proceran mercenary companies, at the moment, so I'd best not ignore her warning.

"They had to hang," I bluntly said. "They broke into sealed crates, if they *didn't* hang the effects on discipline would be disastrous."

"I'll not argue this," the Princess of Hainaut agreeably replied, "but it plays into common fears that you intend to treat the fantassins as you would legionaries, subject to the same rules. It is a highly unpopular prospect and there has been grumbling of contract breaches."

My brow rose. If they tried to pull that it'd not go over well, since the Highest Assembly had decreed that abandoning mercenary contracts during this war would be legally considered the same as desertion, but I knew better than to ride unwilling soldiers too hard. Pressure on soldiers with good spirits got results, but it broke those who were already demoralized.

"I have limited concessions to offer them," I admitted. "I'll not compromise in ways that weaken us ahead of hard battles. Can their appointed representative in my councils not address their troubles?"

The Princess of Hainaut only smiled politely, which I took to mean she'd tried to lead me to a conclusion and I'd failed to get there on my own.

"If I might make a suggestion, Your Majesty?" Princess Beatrice asked.

Yup, I amusedly thought. *Definitely missed a hint there*. On the other hand it meant she was treating me much like she would Proceran royalty, which was good even if I was missing subtext that royalty would grasp. It spoke to a degree of respect, which was a good sign coming from a woman in whose hands I'd placed a lot of influence.

"Please do," I said.

"An appointed representative is a Callowan manner of approaching this," she delicately said. "Orderly and efficient, but relying on trust that is absent. Expanding the fantassin seats in your war council to two and allowing the companies to elect those who will fill them would do much to assuage fears of... overstep."

I squinted at her a moment. They could have a dozen seats and it'd give them no more influence in the decisions, we both knew, since this was very much to be my campaign. On the other hand, it would be a gesture and it'd give them a degree of power over their own situation – which the Princess of Hainaut had gently been trying to explain to me they were afraid I'd summarily strip away from them.

"Agreed," I sighed. "Though make it understood I'll not suffer foolishness even if it is *elected* foolishness. I expect either skill or silence."

"A reasonable request," Princess Beatrice said, inclining her head. "And if I may ask about why the corpses will not be returned to the companies?"

The Concocter had lost several ingredients through the actions of greedy idiots, which had caused her to run late on some brews. For that inconvenience I'd given her leave to harvest what she wanted from the hanged mercenaries before their corpses were burned.

"You don't really want to know the answer to that question, Your Grace," I calmly said. "Actions have consequences, let's leave it at that."

It was a grim note to start the day on, but no less true for it.

—

It would have been a lie to say that particular reunion wasn't one I'd been looking forward to.

"Ivah," I smiled, offering my arm to clasp. "It's been too long."

My Lord of Silent Steps's fingers lightly touched my forearm as I returned the gesture affectionately, and only then did it retreat a step to offer a respectful bow. Ivah had not changed a whit since I'd last seen it, still tall and slender with an ageless youth to its face under the silver and purple paint of the Losara sigil. Its soft leather shoes had not made a sound when it stepped back, and never would: the title it had gained during my days of warring against the Everdark had left its mark, which would never entirely fade.

"I am glad to return at your side, Losara Queen," it replied. "It has been too long since I warred besides you."

"Oh, I don't doubt we have plenty of that ahead of us," I drily said.

I then flicked a glance at the other drow in the tent, who returned the gesture with silver-blue eyes and a cocked hairless eyebrow.

"I see you've yet to get yourself killed," General Rumena said. "Odd, given your fondness for the opposite practice."

Rumena the Tomb-maker was still a striking sight, in these sense that it was one of the only Mighty I'd ever met who actually looked *old*. Standing stooped in his ringmail of obsidian, the old drow was a deep well of Night as well as one of the finest tacticians of its kind. It was also kind of a prick, and one I'd yet to get the better of through words.

"One of these days I'm going to make you into a vest," I told the bastard. "Crows know you already look like you're made of leather."

It respectfully bowed.

"It will change nothing, First Under the Night," the Tomb-maker replied. "As you have never needed an opponent to lose."

In the back of my mind, I heard Komena let out a snort of laughter. Godsdamned goddesses, I thought. They shouldn't play favourites unless that favourite was me.

"It's beneath my station to argue with a subordinate," I airily replied.

"Your skill in retreat remains unrivaled," the old drow praised.

That fucker. I flipped it off, which only got a cackle out of it.

"Enough pleasantries," I said afterwards. "I did have a reason to call on you two."

The old drow nodded.

"Sve Noc has told me of your pact with the Papenheim," General Rumena said. "The sigils are to be split between your armies when we sally out."

"I don't intend to meddle in the details of assigning the sigils," I said, "but you'll be personally leading the third that goes east with the Iron Prince."

It didn't look surprised.

"Some of the fighting to the east will be done underground, I understand," the Tomb-maker said.

"Once you get to Malmedit, yes," I agreed. "Ideally you'd collapse the tunnels the Dead King is using to keep funneling in troops, but the decision will be left to the Prince Klaus' discretion."

I couldn't think of a decent reason why we'd not want those tunnels shut as quickly as possible, but it didn't pay to tie the hands of your commanders before they even set out. The Prince of Hannover knew his business and had been making war on Keter since before I was born, there was no need to breathe down his neck.

"That is pleasing to hear," General Rumena said. "It has been too long since we have fought beneath the Burning Lands. Do you intend a particular Mighty for command in my absence?"

"If you don't have a recommendation, I was considering Jindrich," I said.

It shook its head.

"I would take Mighty Jindrich with me," Rumena replied. "It is a skillful vanguard, and less likely to grow... unruly than it would away from my gaze."

I hummed.

"I could see that," I finally said. "You have a commander for me, then?"

"Several," the old drow replied.

"All qualified?"

"It is so," Rumena agreed. "Shall we discuss them?"

I bit my lip. I wasn't unaware that one of the reasons Sve Noc had been on board with the Firstborn serving in Cleves instead of Hainaut was that it'd let the drow grow into themselves on the surface without my meddling too much in the process. The Sisters could still call on me when there was trouble, as they had when the Langevins had been caught scheming, but it'd always been pretty clear that I was to be a herald and an advisor and not Queen of the Firstborn. Much like with Callow, part of my use would be bringing about my own uselessness.

"Let them choose their own commander," I finally said. "As they now choose their own sigil-holders."

The grey-skinned general studied me a long moment.

"You have grown, I think," the Tomb-maker thoughtfully said. "This war has done more than simply scar you."

"Don't get sentimental on me now," I teased.

It snorted, dismissing me.

"It will be as you say, Losara Queen," Rumena said.

"Good," I sharply nodded. "Ivah can keep me informed and serve as liaison."

Though my Lord of Silent Steps had remained silent as I spoke with the general, as Firstborn ways... discouraged intervening in the conversations of one's superiors, it now nodded with visible pleasure.

"It will be good to resume my duties," Ivah smiled.

—

I spoke with the White Knight at least once a day as he approached Neustal, bringing with him the last few Named who'd join the campaign as well as the latest goods from the Arsenal. Much of it was enchanted weapons and wardstones, but there were some greater prizes as well: Unravellers, tested successfully and so brought to the front by the crate, as well as a set of five pharos devices. Most of the latter would be going to the Iron Prince's host and the reserves, since they'd be of greater use there, but my own forces would get one. It was the kind of the trump card that could tip a battle our way, if used well.

Most of the conversation covered how Named should be assigned, and where. Hanno himself would be going with the Iron Prince, but there would be villains with that host as there would be heroes as part of mine. We wanted to be able to field multiple bands of five should the situation on either prong ask for it, but not all Named were field capable so in practice the numbers did not quite

align even though in principle there were twenty-eight Named in Hainaut. Haggling ensued, since some of our kind were a lot easier to place in band than others, and though on paper I won by securing sixteen Named in reality I got the bad end of the stick.

I'd gotten most the Named who could not fight and two of three transitionals, not including the one who was actually good in a fight – the Young Slayer, although apparently he might have been trouble with Aquiline so it might be for the best – so my fighting numbers were actually smaller than Hanno's in reality. Still, when it came to Named it was all about finding a use for talents. At least I'd gotten Roland as part of my lot and got the White Knight to take on the Grey Pilgrim – and so the Mirror Knight, his latest pupil – so it wasn't all bad.

Archer would be happy I'd secured the Vagrant Spear, too. I'd even managed to leverage a half-hearted effort to claim the Witch of the Woods into keeping all the heroes that'd spent time on the Hainaut front over the last few years, which meant the core of my heroic lineup would be one I was familiar with and on decent terms: the Silver Huntress, the Silent Guardian and the Sage. A shame I'd lost the Barrow Sword, but the logic that Hanno needed someone to lead his villains was hard to argue with – and got Ishaq away from the Blood, which was probably for the best.

By the time the White Knight's convoy left the Twilight Ways and began its way up the road to the stronghold, I had already begun to plan the best use for my Named. It was not one day too soon, for before long we would all be on the march.

—

As far as war councils went, I found twelve a reasonable number of people to seat. The great table Indrani was still carving for me – the latest addition being Hakram's fight with fae at the Arsenal – could handle that many, though given the amount of maps I'd had stretched over the surface of it it'd been necessary to set down smaller side tables for drinks.

That Adjutant would be seated at my side was a given, but occupying the rest of that side of the table were the foremost officers from the Army of Callow that'd hold command in the coming offensive. General Hune of the Second Army, towering above us all with those intelligent eyes set in a brutish face. General Abigail of the Third Army, already into her second cup of wine and her third attempt to let Hune represent the entire Army of Callow contingent. Last but not least Grandmaster Brandon Talbot of the Order of Broken Bells, ever impeccably groomed and currently eyeing the fantassin part of this council with barely-veiled contempt.

For the Dominion stood the rulers of two lines of the Blood, Lord Razin Tanja and Lady Aquiline Osená, in full war paint and

armour. Both of them were taking this seriously enough that they'd even ceased flirting, which was nice to see. By them sat the representative for the drow, silver-eyed and calm. My suggestion that the Firstborn elect their own representative – it was only fair, if the fantassins got to as well – had paid unexpected dividends when they'd chosen an old friend: my own Lord of Silent Steps, Ivah of the Losara Sigil. The intricate beauty of the paint on its face was a rival for that of the Dominion pair, to my quiet satisfaction.

As in most things the Procerans ended up the complicating part, for while Princess Beatrice Volignac of Hainaut held sole speaking rights for her army the fantassins companies had elected two very different people to stand for them. Lady Catalina Ferreiro, a beautiful scarred woman in her thirties, was the Captain-General of the *Ligera Bandera*. It was the largest of the fantassin companies, numbering two thousand and three hundred. Captain Reinald of the *Folies Rouges*, on the other hand, was soft-skinned nearly as fat as Princess Beatrice and his company numbered only six hundred foot. The Folies Rouges were an old and respected name, however, and their captain was known for his shrewdness.

Last of all, for the heroes, the Silver Huntress had come. Alexis had been the natural pick, even the White Knight had agreed. We'd worked together in Hainaut for more than a year without any real trouble between us, I'd entrusted her with independent commands out of my sight several times and my force's path into Hainaut would be encountering more hardened defences than the Iron Prince's – which would make her skill with a bow even more valuable. The Huntress was rather plain-faced, a tall redhead with blue eyes who kept her hair in a bun and whose nose had visibly been broke several times. She had a startlingly girlish voice, high and sweet.

Archer would be coming with me and the two of them couldn't stand each other, so I'd have to be careful to keep them apart, but aside from that little complication I was rather looking forward to having the Silver Huntress along.

The first half hour of the council was spent in idle talk, which I tacitly allowed. The Procerans lived and died by this stuff, so it'd help bring them into the fold, but there was a little more to it than that. The officers in my tent would be side by side in the field for months, and in a coalition force like mine I'd learned the hard way that if a degree of trust and amicability wasn't maintained between the leading commanders it led to blunders. I took the moment to study the officers myself, noting the ties and attitudes. Both my Dominion ducklings got along strangely well with Hune, and had for some time now, so they gravitated towards her. To my lasting amusement the two of them were also subtly intimidated by Genera Abigail's reputation, and

usually avoided her. Princess Beatrice was trying to engage the woman in question in conversation, which had my fellow Callowan regularly shooting me anguished looks as if to assure me that she was not committing treason by plotting with foreign royalty.

Captain-General Ferreiro had worked with the Silver Huntress before, which I vaguely remembered hearing about, but I was surprised to hear that the heroine was also acquainted with Ivah. A few warbands out raiding under the Losara apparently pulled the Huntress' team out of bad spot when she'd gone out to Suifat to have a closer look at enemy landings – an early run-in with the Stitcher, by the sound of it – and they'd left on good terms. The other fantassin leader, Captain Reinald, approached Brandon Talbot to my surprise. The Folies Rouges, I overheard, had apparently fought at the Battle of the Camps.

The Grandmaster of the Order admitted to recognizing the banner, and visibly warmed to the conversation when the mercenary good-naturedly admitted having been whipped by Nauk's soldiers on the right flank – to his luck, he claimed, as he'd pulled out just before the Hellhound's water trap and goblinfire ate up the company that'd advanced in his stead. Reinald then adroitly manoeuvred the conversation to the respective merits of the Liessen charger and the Aisne destrier as a fighting horse, correctly betting on Callowan nobility's endless appetite for speaking of horses, and my brow rose. That man bore watching.

Hakram's wheelchair was not great in such small spaces, despite Masego's best efforts, so he was limited in speaking to the Army officers and the Blood. I put my trust in his eyes to catch anything I'd missed and went around. I traded an anecdote about shortly fighting the Stygian Spears at First Liesse with the Silver Huntress and Captain-General Ferreiro, since it turned out the Ligera Bandera had fought against Stygia when the League invaded in the run-up to the Graveyard. I commiserated about College war games with Hune to the amusement of the Blood.

Apparently Hune's tenure at the head of Tiger Company had been a mixed bag, as an early winning streak had seen her consistently targeted by rivals afterwards.

Eventually Adjutant caught my eye and I heard the unspoken signal that we'd tarried long enough, moving back to my seat at the carved table. The most socially aware among the gathering – which included all three Procerans, to my mixed amusement and exasperation – followed suit, which was enough to begin a chain of the same. Within moments most everyone was standing before their seats without my having had to say a word.

"I'll spare us a meandering speech," I said. "We all know why we're here. Not all of you will be aware, however, that we're to set out early next week."

I flicked a glance across the lot of them, finding mostly practiced calm and the occasional sprouts of eagerness.

"I will be holding the command for our section of the Grand Alliance forces," I said. "And so it is my responsibility to brief you as to the nature of this offensive."

I waited a beat, then pulled my chair to sit and gesture for all others – save one – to do the same.

"I can't and won't claim to be the mind behind our campaign plan," I told them. "It was crafted through the labour of many of our strategists, foremost among them Marshal Juniper of Callow and Prince Klaus Papenheim."

"Your humility does your honour, Your Majesty," Princess Beatrice said, "but the Iron Prince has claimed your hand to have been as much as work here as his own."

My brow rose in genuine surprise. The old flatterer. I'd helped tinker with this some, but I'd not consider this plan to be my baby. Mostly I'd served as a bridge between him and Juniper.

"Far be it from me to contradict Old Klaus, then," I drily said. "Especially if he was in a pleasant mood."

That got some laughter, though most of it polite, and at least one muttered saying in Tolesian about 'something Lycaonese tooth iron something'? My Tolesian was, well, to be honest it mostly *wasn't*.

"The forces represented by the people in this room will number around seventy thousand souls," I said, "but we are to be only a single prong of the offensive. The other will be commanded by the Prince of Hannover, while a third force will remain behind as a strategic reserve under General Pallas of Helike."

Under was a bit of an exaggeration, since no one had really wanted to give her command over their own countrymen, but I'd left the Fourth behind with orders for General Bagram to support her within reason.

"Apologies, Your Majesty," Captain-General Ferreiro said, "but I was under the impression that the sum total of soldiery in Neustal numbered one hundred and fifty thousand?"

"One hundred and sixty," I corrected, "but yes, you've put your finger on the pulse of this. Our will be the largest force of the two setting out by a fair margin, because we're expected to be hitting the harder targets."

Also because seventy-five thousand was the apex of what we believed to be capable of feeding through our supply lines. And

that was an estimate, so when the Princess of Hainaut had come to me with slightly fewer fantassins than expected – none of the smaller forces were worth the effort, in her opinion – I'd not argued against it. Best to have too many supplies than too few.

"None of you are fools," I said. "So you know what that means: we'll be going up Julianne's Highway."

There was a rippling murmur. Not of surprise, for it'd not been empty flattery when I'd gauged that a room of hardened veterans would be able to guess our path upwards, but of... consideration. Everyone was aware there would be rough battles ahead.

"Prince Klaus' force is to serve as a distraction?" General Hune asked.

I nodded at the towering ogre.

"That's part of it," I acknowledged. "He'll be taking fifty-four thousand up the old mining roads to the east, and taking his time in doing so. The reason for that is the latest scouting report from the Silver Huntress, who once more deserves our thanks."

The redhead looked awkward when all eyes turned on her, jerkily nodding back.

"I took the Sage and a war party of Osenal slayers," she said, slowing her words so her voice would sound less high-pitched, "to have a closer look at the fortress-town of Juvelun. The withdrawal of the dead towards the north was an opportunity to venture further than usual."

I offered her a sharp nod.

"The Huntress confirmed what we've been suspecting for some time: Keter has amassed a large force in Juvelun, at least a hundred thousand with several Revenants to lead them," I elaborated.

Idly I wondered where I'd put the markers we used for enemy armies, but when I turned to look Hakram was leaning over in his chair and handing me the black iron blocks. I smiled in thanks as I took, plopping one down on Juvelun. By now everyone was starting to put it together. Neustal, the stronghold where we currently stood, was more or less in the centre of the Hainaut lowlands and sat astride Julianne's Highway – which would go all the way to the capital, up north. Meanwhile our other army would go up the eastern path of the mining road, further along our defensive line, and begin a quick march up into northeastern Hainaut.

The Iron Prince's target was the small city of Malmedit, since the Dead King was using it to funnel troops into our eastern flank through old tunnels, but the road would take his army past

a branch that led to the fortress-town of Juvelun slightly to the west. We were hoping that would draw the undead army there into a battle, since losing Malmedit would be a major setback for Keter. If the dead gave battle, and we expected they would, then the force there would not be able to reinforce the closest strategic location: the city of Hainaut itself, the capital that was the ultimate objective for my own push.

"We've identified four other large Keteran forces," I continued. "One is holed up out west, in Luciennerie, where it sits defensively on the blue road. We believe it's between one hundred and one hundred fifty thousand. It's also getting steady reinforcements, and we're not sure from *where* exactly. "

I'd simplified a bit there, I reflected as I set down the corresponding block of iron. While that army was strategically defensive, it was also the force that kept flooding the western side of our defensive line with raiders and small attacks. The only reason the Dead King hadn't pushed further was that if he did there was a risk the armies under Malanza would sally out from the town of Coudrent, to its west, and try to anchor our flanks together. It'd take a lot of pressure out of the both of us, which was why Juniper had originally wanted to split our forces in three and take a swing at Luciennerie as well.

Talks with other strategists and fresh information had since made us revise that first plan she'd suggested, but the bare bones of it were still essentially the same.

"Another large force is north of the previous and beyond the highlands, in Suifat," I continued, placing the black iron. "Though it was previously around seventy thousand, they've had a flood of reinforcements and we now believe them a match for the Luciennerie force in numbers. Thankfully for us, that army is now on the move and marching to try and retake Trifelin."

It was the Dead King's armies that would be in for a rough time there, for once. Malanza has suffered a stinging defeat there early in the war for Cleves, so when she'd finally taken back the town she'd fortified every nook and cranny of the region. Gods smile on whoever tried Rozala Malanza on those grounds, because she ready and she was *angry*.

"We've all been aware of the army waiting between the Hollow and the Sister for some time," I said, easily plopping down a block there. "We still believe it to be a little under a hundred thousand, and it has been keeping a purely defensive stance."

It would be our first opponent, one way or another.

"The last known force, and we believe it to be the largest, is somewhere north of the capital," I continued. "Two hundred thousand, some of the finest troops in the service of the Dead

King. We last saw them around the Prisoner's Mercy, but we're not sure where they might have march since – save for one detail, we are *certain* they're not in the capital."

We had the Augur, the Wise Astrologer and the Enigmatic Prophet in agreement on that, aside from our own risky Named scouting through the Twilight Ways.

"The offensive's basic shape is as follows," I said. "To the west, allied forces based in Coudrent will go raiding down the blue road to pin down the army in Luciennerie, while a significant slice of the Grand Alliances forces of Cleves concentrates in Trifelin to hold it."

It'd be tight, given that Malanza had lost some forces to us, but so long as there wasn't a major offensive through the lakes – and we'd not seen the build-up for one, not for lack of looking – then she would be able to succeed at both those tasks.

"Out east, Prince Klaus will march up the mining roads and attempt to bait out the army in Juvelun," I said. "If it refuses to give battle he'll move against Malmedit itself, which will at the very least force pursuit by the Juvelun army."

Ideally he'd take the old mining city quickly and then hold it against the pursuing dead, but I doubted it'd end up that clean.

"Meanwhile, at the heart of it all, we'll be marching on Lauzon's Hollow," I continued. "We'll be doing so at the quickest pace we can manage, to threaten to take the Hollow before Keter can move its nearby army to hold it."

"That stratagem worked last year," Lady Aquiline said. "Which means the Hidden Horror will expect it now."

"That's our intent," I bluntly said. "Once that force moves to defend the Hollow, it will leave the Cigelin Sisters vulnerable. Our reserve of twenty-eight thousand will then strike out from the Twilight Ways and seize it."

"If they split their forces?" Hune asked.

"Then we force the Hollow," I shrugged. "They won't be able to bleed us with so few."

General Abigail looked at the map and frowned.

"What happens if the undead in Luciennerie ignore the raids and attack our defensive line instead?" she asked.

"The reserve defends," I said. "It only needs to hold for some time, as we have reinforcements from Callow and southern principalities already on the way. Then Keter loses Luciennerie

and we pincer the attacking force between Cleven reinforcements and our own defenders.”

It’d mean a very different campaign, but it was also one we were capable of fighting.

“It would still mean no reinforcements for the battle at the Hollow,” Captain Reinald pointed out.

“In that situation,” I replied, “we would reassess and consider if Prince Klaus’ army using the Ways to attack the Sisters instead would be feasible. If it is not, our objective would change to securing the east and Juvelun in particular.”

It’d give us a shot at the capital, and from there we’d be able to muster a truly brutal offensive against the Hidden Horror on three sides. A siege of Hainaut would become inevitable, it was true, but while we’d wanted to avoid that we couldn’t always get what we wanted. Would that war were so polite. My gaze swept the table and found a great many questions, but no one outright disbelieving that this could be done. Good, I thought as I cracked my neck.

“All right,” I said, “if you have inquiries, now is the time. We can move on to the marching order afterwards.”

It was going to be a long night, but better to talk now than to bleed later.

Chapter 48: Hilltop

“Faith is not an act of surrender but of conquest, for doubt lies within us all.”

Daphne of the Homilies, best known for ending hereditary rule in Atalante

Arranging it had been simple, in a sense. Just a matter of timing, of sensing what people would want and how they went about getting it. When you had that, as I’d once been told it was all just... objects in motion. And it’d had to be that, because more direct manipulation would have been sniffed out in a heartbeat by the people involved. That was the trouble with trying to beat people at a game they were better at than you. I wanted answers, though, and I wanted them in a way that wouldn’t scar what I wanted achieved. And so here I was, in the darkened warehouse standing before an open crate and holding an artefact in my hands.

It didn’t look like much, for such a dangerous thing.

A Callowan knight's lance was usually around nine feet in length but the *kataphraktoi* used longer ones, closer to twelve. The unraveller I held in my hands was shorter than either, perhaps a little over six feet in height, and lighter as well. It was easy enough to see why, as unlike a lance of hardened wood the unravellers were partly hollow: at the heart of them was a tunnel that went from the top to the bottom, with a thin wire of cold iron hung up. The outside of unraveller was touched with coin-like patches of metal, mostly bronze and brass, which themselves were connected to thin metal wires within the wooden shell.

The most expensive part was the sculpted amethyst ring at the bottom of the lance-like artefact, like a pommel to the wooden handle, which even at rest hummed with magic. The rest was runic carvings in the wood to stabilize the product, and a steel tip at the end of the unraveller that was very carefully linked with the central cold iron wire without compromising the artefact's ability to, well, be used as a weapon. It needed to bite into bone or flesh before it disrupted the sorcery, which was unfortunate but couldn't feasibly be fixed.

It wasn't that we weren't *capable* of it, just that the materials required would multiply the cost of production by at least ten. We'd not be able to fill entire crates with unravellers, which would defeat the entire purpose of that artefact's existence: having an answer to necromantic constructs that we could mass-produce.

In the lamplight of the supply warehouse I studied the artefact closely, testing the weight and the way the grip handled. Archer would need to tinker with hers before she found a way to fire them by her bow, and likely the Silver Huntress as well – whose own silver recurve was shorter than Archer's absurdly large longbow, but only in the sense that it was the size of an *actual* longbow. I'd need to have half a crate set aside for them to tinker with, and maybe lend them Roland when they got to it: the Rogue Sorcerer was only a passable enchanter, but even Masego praised his artefact-handling.

"I don't get the cold iron wire," I admitted out loud. "I've done the readings you suggested, I get why the patches are there and at different metal purities: it pulls at the spell structure in different ways, makes it unsteady. But cold iron isn't supposed to be conducive to magic so why put it at the centre?"

The stuff hurt fae, because having it worked without the heat of a forge meant it didn't lose properties through the transmutation affect – which I'd been chuffed to learn even Praesi recognized had been discovered by a Callowan wizardess, Blaine Caen! – so it was still 'of Creation' in a way that forged or wrought iron just wouldn't be. But all I'd read about the stuff said it was kind of

standoffish to magic, which was why people used it to make boundaries in rituals so often.

"Because the Hierophant is a singularly brilliant mage," Akua said, frank with her praise.

She'd chosen to stand at the edge of the lamplight and the shadows, where the play of light and dark on her form was almost like a veil thrown over her clothes. Tonight she'd chosen a simple sleeveless, neckless silver dress in a wavelike pattern interrupted by slightly more ornate stripes – all of it covering a base of dark cloth. A thick silver choker and a hat of silvery tinsel stripes ending in dark gauzy veil completed the ensemble, making for a striking sight. It was one of her finer picks since I'd known her, and by the occasional smirk she'd clearly noticed my appreciation.

"I'm aware Zeze is a genius," I replied, rolling my eyes. "If I could get an actual explanation, though?"

She smiled.

"Cold iron is resistant to magic, not repellant," Akua said. "And it is an unnaturally stable material, in the sense that it will take to all forms of power by the exact same proportion – Cosmas' Constant. In this case the wire serves two purposes. First it stabilizes the magic coming from varying metal purities as it is sucked into the amethyst ring, which is why the unraveller does not simply explode in a shower of shards when it is used. Secondly, it actually *enhances* the destabilizing effect on a necromantic construct: the iron wire's resistance to magic means more of the construct's invested magic is sucked in without it ever reaching the amethysts, and some of the runes carved ensure that 'wasted' magic does not turn to heat."

Akua paused pushing herself off the wall and more fully into the light.

"It is an *inspired* solution," the woman who'd once been the Diabolist admiringly said. "And not one I would have considered in his place. I've always sought the elimination of waste in artefacts and rituals, it would not have occurred to me to actively pursue it instead."

"Masego has his moments," I agreed.

I set down the unraveller atop the open crate, over the eleven remaining ones cradled in cloth and straw. The real breakthrough had been the amethyst ring though, or so Roland had implied, and that'd been a contribution of the Blessed Artificer. It was a relatively cheap precious stone, in Procer, which was why some Ashuran ship mages liked to buy them in bulk in Valencis and enchant them to hold winds. The ring structure was even an

invention of her own, though it'd had to be slightly reworked since it was being used to anchor an enchantment instead of Light. While I might not get along particularly well with Adanna of Smyrna, I was not complaining that she'd ended up as one of the heroes assigned to my army.

"The Dead King will know we have these," I finally said, "or at least suspect. We've done enough field tests he can't have missed it."

It was hard to notice something the size of a beorn or a tusk get struck with a lance and then... collapse, barely a heartbeat later as the necromancy animating it shattered like glass. We'd been afraid that the Dead King's necromancers would be able to raise them right back up, but we were pretty sure by now they *couldn't*. The Arsenal specialists believed it might take as much as months of rituals to raise those creatures, imbuing the different parts with different spells as they were being assembled. It just wasn't something that could be done in the field and on the fly, not even with massed mages.

"You were careful to use the prototypes only sparingly," Akua pointed out. "Hiding we have these was always a fool's errand, but we can still take him by surprise with the sheer amount that can be fielded. He will be expecting these to be Named-work, not a pattern that trained mages and artisans can make on their own."

Named were still arguably the source of the labour, since they'd been the one to train these mages and artisans when it came to making these, but her point stood. By now almost a full third of the Arsenal was dedicating its time to producing stockpiles of these to send to the fronts. There'd even been talk of starting workshops in Procer, though I'd balked: the Dead King and Malicia both had spies, and if either got their hands on the plans it'd make it much easier to figure out a countermeasure. I wanted to extend our window of effectiveness with the unravellers as long as possible, especially if it coincided with the offensive for Hainaut.

Ideally, the Gigantes would then raise massive wards on the coasts that'd keep the dead out and we'd have breathing room to make a counter-countermeasure in time for the assault on Keter itself.

"We'll see," I finally said.

We'd only caught the Hidden Horror flatfooted a handful of times since we'd unveiled the pharos devices, so while I was hoping to repeat the experience I wasn't going to be relying on the hope. I cast a last look at the lances, snorting.

"Something amuses, my heart?" Akua asked.

"For all the cleverness that went into these fucking things," I said, "they still have to be stabbed into the enemy. There's something almost reassuring about that."

Even when you put all the brilliance in the world into an artefact, in the end you still had to find some thug to stick it into your foe. At least folk like me would never be entirely out of work. I felt a tug against my little finger, and I knew my patience had finally borne results. I'd traced tripwires of Night around the warehouse entrances – though no more than that, or I'd risk irritating the wards – so I knew it the moment the door opened even without needing to turn. Akua cocked a brow in my direction, her superior senses having caught the sounds without needing any such tricks. It was two people who were joining us by navigating through the darkened maze of crates, it was easy to tell when I pricked my ear.

I hoisted myself up to sit on the edge of the open crate before as they strolled into the lamplight, Akua moving to lean against the side to my left. Covering my bad leg as well as implying she was my left hand all in the same gesture, I noted. *Fucking Praesi*, I then added, but not without fondness.

"I'll take it as a courtesy you tripped the wire at all," I called out.

Especially given who I was addressing.

"You overpraise me," the Grey Pilgrim drily replied, stepping into the light.

"There is no point in skulking around allies," the White Knight pointedly told him before following suit.

Tariq had a way of slipping past any and all measures I wove around myself with Night. He couldn't fool the Crows, at least, but the Peregrine's habit of turning up unexpected and without warning was not abated by anything else I could call on. He'd not been anywhere this good at it back around the days of the Graveyard, but then if I could learn about heroes they could most certainly learn about me.

"Though I wonder that you saw fit to place such a measure at all, Your Majesty," Hanno said, sounding genuinely surprised.

"Named are a nosy breed, Lord White," Akua smiled. "And there are a great many of them in Neustal. As always, it is a pleasure to see you."

"Lady Sahelian," the White Knight blandly replied, inclining his head the slightest bit then turning to me. "The Adjutant pointed me here when I sought a conversation with you. Is now an agreeable time?"

Of course it was, I'd picked it.

"If you don't mind my shadow," I shrugged.

"Such sweet things you call me," Akua drolly noted.

"Could you not send her away?"

I turned a steady look on Tariq, who did not look apologetic in the slightest. And though I could have chided him, as it was rude to ask audience and then quibble over the given terms – even more so for two heroes to corner me in the dark and ask me to send away my only nearby ally – I held my tongue. I'd gone to a spot of trouble to arrange a pit fight between two of the finer speakers I knew, so I was in no hurry to spot it. Akua took my half-beat of silence as the open field it was, and took to it without any visible hesitation.

"I assure you, Peregrine, that no disease will come of addressing me directly," Akua smilingly replied.

I kept my expression blank. The danger with getting answers Akua had always been that she was a better manipulator than me – it meant I couldn't put my finger on the scale, try to guide an outcome, without her likely noticing it. But Tariq was perfectly capable of matching wits with her, and in his own way Hanno could be said to be even sharper. It'd taken me long to learn the lesson that sometimes doing nothing was the best way to get what you wanted, but I'd gotten there eventually.

"If you'd prefer," Tariq politely acknowledged, turning to face her. "I distrust you, Akua Sahelian, and do not want you to be part of this conversation. Please leave."

She hid the surprise skilfully, but I knew her well. A Praesi blind spot, this one: the Pilgrim just wasn't proud in that way that the Named of the Dread Empire were. On the contrary, in his own way he was humble enough he was perfectly willing to make a request like this without batting an eye. It made a lot of her usual social arsenal effectively useless, since he simply did not care about the hierarchal nuances she was so adept at using. Now came the interesting part, though, how the shade would deal with the challenge. Conflict was always told the tales that smooth faces hid away.

"I recall no reason for there to be distrust between us, Grey Pilgrim," Akua replied. "And your companion's silence beg the question of whether your opinion is shared."

Mhm, I thought. Better than kicking this back to me as the person who could dismissed her – not that I'd expected her to, she'd be well aware that if I'd wanted to intervene I already would have – but I wasn't entirely satisfied with the answer. The first part

floated, but the second still smacked too much of trying to turn heroes on each other. But was this old habits dying hard or just social ploy to suss out where the White Knight stood? I couldn't quite tell yet.

"You are a criminal, Lady Sahelian," Hanno frankly replied, "but your sins were committed against Callow and you are in the custody of its queen. It is not my place to meddle in this. I would caution you, however, against confusing respect for your warden as tolerance for the most egregious mass-murderer of our age."

The Sword of Judgement wasn't one to pull his punches, it had to be said. But there was a reason I'd wanted him as part of this conversation: unlike the Grey Pilgrim, whose own dabbling in horror might have made more wary of bringing up the Doom of Liesse, Hanno absolutely could and *would* go there. That was a sting I'd wanted Akua to feel so that I might see what it brought out.

"I neither seek nor expect your esteem, Lord White," Akua said. "But I had hopes for courtesy, at least. Or is it too much to expect of a hero?"

Good, I thought. She'd not countered by going after the bloody records of heroes like the Saint or the Pilgrim, even though it was the easiest and most effective parry. Tariq would answer he'd killed to prevent suffering, the debate would get religious – for lack of a better term – and enter grounds where no one could truly win. It also meant that, deep down, Akua did not think of the Folly as something on equal footing with Tariq seeding innocents with the plague to catch Black. Or, at least, she recognized it was not an argument that could be made and be considered to hold water.

That'd be a lesser prize, but still a prize. A few years back, she wouldn't have *cared* that people believed her to be wrong when she was espousing Praesi – more accurately Praesi highborn – philosophies. She would have said the words anyway, and should circumstance prove her right down the line pointed to that as evidence of the Wasteland's dark but undeniable wisdom. Now she was avoiding that sort of talk even when trying to win the argument by other means. Her definition of winning, of how it could be achieved, had shifted. And not because she was being coerced or fearing punishment.

It'd sunk into her, the act. Maybe no more than the slightest drop, but that was all it took.

"It is unpleasant to talk of butchery," the White Knight calmly replied, "but it is not impolite. The burden of snuffing out a hundred thousand lives is yours to bear, Lady Sahelian, and your discomfort with the truth of that is of little import to me."

"You know very little of what you speak of," Akua quietly replied, "yet display great certainty. There are many sayings on people who behave in such a manner. What do you know of my follies, save what others have told you?"

"I know enough," Hanno simply said. "And this conversation is waste of time."

"Is it?" she mused. "The two of you have decided I am to be dismissed, and there is nothing more to be said of the matter?"

She clicked her tongue.

"Though my hands are dripping red, White Knight, and I'll not deny this or quibble over it, I have dealt fairly and openly with you and yours," Akua said. "I have no expectation of ever seeing the scales of Liesse settled, but that sin is not yours to ask answer for – so what have I done to you, to deserve this scorning?"

Ah, I thought. *And there it was.* I'd been right, then, this conversation had been needed. The nudge over the crest of the hill was still required so that she'd finally be able to see the slopes on both sides. Some part of her, perhaps the same that she allowed to enjoy the companions she'd made, still thought that so long as the mountainous horror that'd been the Folly remained far away and she was good and loyal and lovely she could have her warm place in the sun. She spoke the words as I'd said them to her, but it'd not really sunk in that Liesse *wasn't something that could be atoned for.*

That even if she saved ten lives for every one she'd taken, she would still be the same woman who'd murdered an entire city.

I couldn't be the one to lead her there, though. I couldn't deny it either – it was true, all other considerations aside – but to keep my role I could only agree to this and not be the one that brought it up. Otherwise she'd know there was a deeper game, beyond the one I'd admitted to. The long price that had yet to be paid. I couldn't be the one to blot out that hazy hope, otherwise she'd ask herself *why* I would do that. Why, if I was manipulating her, I'd do away with the mirrored oasis that was being genuinely one of us. And I couldn't have her ask that question, not yet.

I reached within my cloak, the gesture drawing no attention.

"I've known a great many monsters," Tariq pensively said, "but in your own way you are among the most tragic – how you were raised, how you were shaped, it robbed you of the ability to understand what you did even as you did it. But it has begun to dawn, I think. The scale of the evil in something like the Doom, the way it ripples out into the world. How ugly such a thing fundamentally is, so unlike the stories of glory and triumph."

The thing that made Tariq dangerous, I thought, was that he was being sincere. This wasn't a veiled insult or a threat or some stratagem: he was genuinely grieved by what he saw in Akua. How accurate what he saw might be remained debatable, but the way the shade's face went solid for the fraction of a moment – as if she was locking it by will – told me she'd read his sincerity and it'd struck deep. I'd been in her place before, as it happened. There'd been a reason I wanted Tariq here.

"Fair dealings and courtesy change nothing, Akua Sahelian," the Peregrine said, almost gently. "You killed a city. There is nothing to be done, in the wake of that, that will buy you trust."

She did not look at me, but I felt her attention shift my way. I forced my face into stolid blankness but just a beat too slowly – not even on purpose, it'd been simple luck.

"I believe you might even care for a few others," Tariq said. "But there is nothing redeeming in this, my dear. Even the most terrible of us can love."

"I am not your anything, Peregrine," Akua replied, tone forcefully cold.

Overcompensation, I decided. She didn't control her voice anywhere as well now that she was a shade, though she'd gained in other ways.

"Then I withdraw the address," the old man said. "It is not enough to avoid doing evil, Akua. You have to do good. Even when there is no reward. *Especially* when there is no reward."

I almost smiled. There went the last piece I'd been waiting for. Selflessness, the greatest of virtues in someone like the Pilgrim's eyes – a virtue he clutched most desperately, I expected, considering some of the things he'd done over the year at the behest of the Choir of Mercy. And Tariq had spoken of it just after effectively telling her that the Folly was not something she should ever expect to dig her way out of. *And now, I thought as I watched Akua Sahelian, you see the view from atop the hill. One slope goes back down the way you came, into the beliefs of the Truebloods. But the other one feels just as pointless, doesn't it? Because you know there'll never be a payoff, a redemption, a settling of accounts.*

But she stood atop the hill now and her eyes had been opened to the choice. She knew she'd have to make it, sooner or later.

That'd been what I needed from these two. I'd been... lenient, perhaps. I'd let us get comfortable, too used to tiptoeing around the lines while indulging in the unsaid. It would have been too easy to stay there, if the bleak light of truth hadn't been shone

down on all of this again. But it didn't feel good. I'd not really grasped, when I first conceived of my revenge, that it would punish me as well. Maybe it was better this way, I decided. A long price should cost you something to, require that you put something of yourself in it. It was too easy to get drunk on the bloodletting otherwise. What I'd wanted from this has been delivered, though, so there was no need to drag this out any longer. I struck a match on the side of the crate, lighting my pipe and pulling at the mouth.

It got their attention, shaking them out of the conversation.

"You wanted to talk," I told the heroes, blowing out a ring of smoke. "So talk."

Hanno looked mildly irritated, but spoke up anyway.

"There are two major matters," the White Knight said. "The first is the missing army of two hundred thousand undead. The Iron Prince mentioned that our oracles were all in agreement that it was not in the capital, but there are ways to fool soothsaying."

"There are," I agreed.

I was hardly unaware, given that Black had run a game against the Augur for months by moving his army fast and picking his battles at the last moment. I raised an eyebrow, inviting him to elaborate.

"An army unseen is the blade of fate," the Pilgrim said. "For those Bestowed by the Heavens most of all, but any Bestowed can try that luck."

Meaning that force was bound to appear where and when it'd fuck up our plans the most. They'd come to me instead of Prince Klaus with this worry because I'd been Named, and understood the tricks of fate. The Prince of Hannover would listen to them, he was not fool, but not necessarily believe or understand in the way that I would.

"It was kept in mind when the campaign was planned," I assured them. "There's only so many places that army can be, right now, and while I agree it's probably not guarding the bridge as would be most convenient there are limits to the pull a pattern like this has. I'm not dismissing your concerns, to be clear, but you have to understand him having the wind in his sails won't work like it would with a living army."

Confusion on both their faces, which wasn't unexpected. Both of them were experienced heroes, and familiar with war, but neither had ever commanded troops.

"The d dead will get fewer supply accidents on the move and maybe good weather," I mused, "but it won't be a great uplift like it would be with a living army. Undead armies already don't tire and don't have to worry about morale, there's just less for providence to give them. Besides, to be honest the wind's more in our sails than the Dead King's."

I pulled at my pipe, then spat out a mouthful of smoke.

"We might not have a story we can ride," I elaborated, "but we've got a lot of godsdamned heroes to weigh in on our side of the scales. That counts. Believe me when I say that, because unlike everyone else here I've fought armies with that many heroes attached before."

Hanno cleared his throat.

"To be clear," he said, "you have a contingency?"

"Several," I replied.

Not the kind of stuff you talked about at a war council, but I did have pieces in place. Hasenbach had been more than willing to indulge my paranoia, considering our common opponent was the Hidden Horror.

"Then I will put my trust in that," the White Knight said.

Tariq looked less convinced.

"It is a strong story," he reminded me.

"How'd it work out for you, at the Graveyard?" I pointedly asked him.

Thousands of cavalry from all across Procer, readying for a surprise charge out of Arcadia into my forces, had instead been tossed back into Creation in a murderous tumble of panicked horses and broken bones. It was a good trick, I wasn't going to argue against that – I'd used it myself against Summer, during Five Armies and One – but it wasn't as foolproof as he was making it sound. Especially not when the other side had superior mobility, as we did against the dead.

"It took a third party to make it fail," the Peregrine said.

"There is no third party here, Catherine."

"I'm not sharing the contingencies," I bluntly told him. "Lord Yannu was brought in on the relevant ones, as the strategist sent by the Dominion to the Arsenal, but I'm not thinning the secret by further spreading it. If you can't deal with that, take it up with the appropriate authorities."

The old hero sighed.

"You are the appropriate authorities," Tariq reminded me.

"And I'm telling you it's handled, so don't worry your pretty little head about it," I replied with a winning smile.

While no general, the Pilgrim could at least recognize a lost battle when he was fighting one.

"The other matter is the one I would prefer privacy for," he said.

He didn't flick a glance at Akua, but I did. She'd been silent, her face like a mask, but those golden eyes missed little and she'd been listening closely.

"That's nice," I commented.

A beat passed and I cocked an eyebrow.

"So, what is it?"

Hanno looked mildly amused as he answered in the other hero's place.

"We followed the First Prince's suggestion and it bore the results she predicted," the White Knight said. "With a hero handling the scrying ritual and myself serving as the interlocutor, the elves finally accepted to talk."

Unlike when it'd been a hero making the ritual but someone else serving as the diplomat, which got us a beat of connection with the sorcery before it was shattered, or when Hanno had first attempted to make contact through the ritual of Arsenal mages and the elves had simply warded against the ritual. Of course the finicky little pricks wouldn't bother to answer to any less than the appointed leader of Calernia's heroes, with his busywork done by another fucking chosen of the Heavens. They might be even worse vultures than the Choir of Endurance, who'd at least not been so godsdamned pretentious about it.

"Let me guess, they're keeping the Spring crown?" I drily said.

"In essence," Hanno admitted. "They've agreed to make sure their ritual does not destroy the surroundings, or damage the fabric of Creation, but my attempt to discuss alliance against the Dead King were brusquely rebuffed."

Typical. Well, they'd had a border with the fucker for like a millennium so I supposed I shouldn't be too surprised.

"The return of the Spellblade's body was remarked upon," Hanno then told me. "It was implied that to return the courtesy no claim would be made on the crown of Autumn."

"All heart, those elves," I grunted.

Well, at least we weren't dealing with a war on one more front. That was always worth celebrating.

"Ah, and one lasting thing," the White Knight said. "They asked if the Ranger is part of the Truce and Terms, and when I informed them she is not warned us against allowing her to sign them. They would take this as an act of war."

I closed my eyes and sighed. Well, it wasn't like she'd been going to sign those anyways. They involved too much not-killing-strangers-for-fun for the Lady of the Lake, by my reckoning.

"Duly noted," I said, opening my eyes.

As expected, news about the crowns – which I'd learned there would be from Masego this morning in a private chat, hours before this lot got it going – had prompted the Pilgrim to want to expel Akua. I'd not been sure as to what the news would be, but in the end that'd not really mattered had it?

"We're done here, I believe," I said

Neither saw fit to argue the point, though by the look on the Pilgrim's face this wasn't the last I'd be hearing about contingencies. Good luck to him, since he was headed out with the eastern army and they'd be leaving in two days – before my own force set out. I suggested to Akua we return to my tent to take another crack at planning our route, which we'd taken a break from to visit this warehouse in the first place, but she begged off.

"The new wardstones for the Third require adjustment, dearest," Akua told me. "I will see to that first."

Lie, I thought. *You just want to be alone*. I didn't call her out on it. Why would I? My plan was working.

It brought me no joy, but my plan was working.

Chapter 49: Association

"There are two ways to interpret a prophecy: the way that spells your doom and the wrong one."

– Dread Empress Dismal

I knelt, pushing down a twinge of pain, and squinted closely at the copper wire.

Obviously my quarters had been trapped, but *how*? The wire was of the finer kind Pickler had come up with during my time in the

Everdark, but even though pushing fully open the door would definitely pull on it – and so on a contraption tied to munitions, hopefully but not necessarily College-grade instead of military – the angle was all wrong for a sharper or a brightstick. Sure, a full brightstick would shatter my eardrum from this close but I wouldn't be blinded. And I'd lose what, at most a shredded ankle to a sharper? This was amateur hour. Where was the triple-wire spring with the overhead sharper? No, I was being screwed with. This was bait.

The foundations of my house in Neustal, which I didn't actually use all that often compared to my tent, were stone raised above ground-level as was standard in areas where the Dead King might attempt assassination. It meant I had a single 'step' to take going into the house, in reality just a small extension of the foundation beyond the walls. And when I leaned closer and smelled that step, I found a familiar scent: stone dust and sapper's plaster. That little fucker had put in a weight-sensitive demolition charge after hollowing out the step, hadn't he? The copper wire had just been to draw my attention away. Narrowing my eyes, I used my staff to hoist myself back up on my feet.

I wasn't going to let this ambush pass without a bit of a rap on the knuckles, of course. It was good for my sappers to occasionally be reminded I was just as shameless as them and twice as mean.

"Special Tribune Robber," I called out. "Report."

There was a beat of silence.

"It was all Borer's idea," a voice cheerfully called out from inside. "I tried to stop him, Your Maleficence, but with his brute strength he overwhelm-"

"I asked for a report," I mildly said. "Come out and deliver it."

I pulled on Night the slightest bit, just in case. Special Tribune Robber, who'd held his rank for several years now, had visibly aged since I last saw him. That was often the way with goblins, whose lifespan was much shorter than most other races'. How old was he now? Near twenty, I imagined. Over the hill by the standards of his race, who quickly began going decrepit past thirty when they lived that long. He was distantly of a Matron line, I knew, so I held out hope that his face grown even gaunter and the pulls of skin around his yellow eyes were not warning signs.

Deftly the sapper came to stand on the stone, and offered me an offensively terrible salute paired with a smug grin of white needles. I could not help but notice the distinct lack of him exploding. Vexing.

"Reporting at your leisure, Your Wickedhousness," Robber cheerfully said.

I cocked my head to the side.

"Fine-tuned it to trigger only above your weight?" I said.

"No idea what you're talking about, ma'am," he assured me. "Although, while we're at it, I'd like to report Captain Borer for wanton mutiny, assault of a superior officer--"

"How long did it even take you to hollow that thing out?" I asked, reluctantly impressed.

"Pickler made this stone-eating acid while we were up north," Robber said. "Works like a charm. Based on some Lycaonese alchemy they use to keep their ramparts clean."

There was a beat of silence.

"Is what I would say were I Captain Borer, who is *obviously* responsible for--"

"How strong are the munitions?" I mildly asked.

"Like the gentle caress of a breeze," he lied.

A slender tentacle of Night pierced through the fresh plaster, triggering the munitions within, and the little bastard fell into the step with little burn but large billows of a pungent black smoke. I took a sniff and almost gagged. Leftover smoker ingredients mixed with something rank, I'd guess. Robber had always been a deft hand with munitions, especially recipes that weren't on the record. Even as the goblin tumbled forward at my feet, coughing, I leaned against my staff and cocked an eyebrow.

"So what have we learned today?" I asked.

"You are an implacable foe to all goblinkind," he croaked out. "And take pleasure in persecuting your poor, innocent, *loyal* servants."

A grin tugged at my lips.

"I did saddle Borer with you," I conceded, "so I suppose an argument can be made for the second."

"You could offer me healing, at least," Robber complained, then faked a few fresh coughs. "Aren't you some sort of fancy priestess these days, Boss? First Into The Pie or something like that."

I knew he was full of shit, because the Sisters were actually wildly popular with the sappers and even goblins in general. It

was almost like, culturally speaking, they were very comfortable with the idea of unknowable female eldritch entities of murder and theft standing above them. *Go figure*. I wouldn't call them converts to the Tenets, which were much too drow in nature to ever really find takers beyond the Firstborn, but these days sappers liked to mark their equipment with the Crows and the occasional rabbit or bird was bled in their name before being tossed in a cookpot. Andronike was rather charmed by the practice and had sounded me out on the subject of bestowing Night – I wasn't opposed, so long as she knew what she was in for. Komena was lukewarm at the notion of branching out too much from the drow, though, so it'd gone nowhere.

"You're right," I mused. "Silly of me to forget."

Quicker than he was able to dodge, I rapped the top of his hairless head with the side of my staff. He yelped and paddled back.

"How is that healing?" he accused.

"Well," I shrugged, "you're not thinking about the cough anymore, are you?"

A heartbeat later he was cackling, and I shared in the laughter. He darted in to clasp my arm in a legionary's salute, close but light-touched, before backing away.

"It's good to see you, Boss," Robber said.

"You too," I smilingly replied. "You malevolent little shit. Was this just a heads up you got in, or did you have a reason to seek me out?"

"Pickler wants to see you," he said. "Sent me to get your attention."

I snorted.

"Haven't been able to get more than three words out of that one in the weeks she's been here, but *now* she feels chatty?" I said. "Let me guess: she's finally finished her latest tinkering trip and she wants to show off."

"You're the one who named her Sapper-General," Robber shrugged. "Then you compounded that by throwing a mountain of coin and artisans at her. She'd been on a two-year tinkering binge, Boss. I had to assign someone to making sure she ate."

I winced, though I was not entirely surprised. In theory Pickler was the head of all the sappers in the Army of Callow, which had been made into a separate military order not unlike the Order of Broken Bells – I just didn't have enough sappers to use them the

way the Legions did – but she was utterly uninvolved with field command. Even company assignments were largely handled by her second, Commander Waffler, with her only occasionally meddling in matters. Her efforts had been on making war engines for this new war we were fighting, and Twilight's Pass has been her both her testing and proving grounds.

"No one told me was quite that bad," I admitted, faintly apologetic.

Robber had always been sweet on his old commanding officer, in a goblin way. It was unlikely to ever go anywhere, but that didn't mean he couldn't hold a torch. We got moving as we talked, him leading the way as I limped to the side.

"She's pleased as a raider on a moonless night," Robber dismissed. "I'm not irked about that part, just that she's learned some bad habits. Nobody seems to care since she's spitting out wonders keeping to those hours, but it's not good for her health."

He looked at me from the corner of his large yellow eyes.

"She's been wildly happy since you freed her from field command and let her loose, Boss," the Special Tribune said. "And she's grateful, don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Buy you know she's always been like this."

I softly smiled. Look at him, all these years and he was still quietly cleaning up behind Pickler the same way he had back when we'd just been a bunch of kids fighting in College war games. Some things never changed, huh?

"We're all creatures of habit, in our own ways," I drily said. "I know better than to take offence, Robber. Not seeing you two for a few years won't change that."

Hells, I didn't have enough friends left alive to start getting petty with them over little things like, say, Pickler's inability to pretend she cared a whit about niceties when instead she could be attending *glorious machinery*. Reassured, Robber caught me up on gossip from Twilight's Pass as we walked with great relish. No doubt he was making up half the tales. I choked, though, when he mentioned the supposedly fierce debate among the northern armies about whether Prince Frederic and Prince Otto were close friends or secret lovers.

"You met the man in the Arsenal, didn't you?" Robber asked. "Did you get a read on whether he'd enjoy that sort of lance-handling?"

The goblin obscenely wiggled his hairless brows, startling a laugh out of me. I could have told him that Frederic was actually

a more than decent jouster, but that was best kept quiet even among my closest.

"Alas, I only ever got to see him use a sword," I sighed. "A tragedy, Robber. You know what these pretty boys do to me."

He wrinkled his nose in disgust, not even entirely feigned.

"Humans," he sighed. "It's all fluids with you lot – and not even the fun ones, like blood or goblinfire."

I made a somewhat unkind comment about the sexual attraction the average sapper might feel towards a crate of munitions, which devolved the conversation into bickering all the rest of the way to where Pickler was holed up. A shooting range, I discovered, or at least the battered remnants of one. Targets had been blown through in ways experience allowed me to match with ballistas, but it'd been more than just stone that'd done this. The grounds and wooden targets were scorched, like they'd been set aflame. I frowned as I limped to the edge of the firing range, interested enough I didn't stop to chat with the sapper crews fielding the three ballistas on the range.

I knelt slowly, leaning on my staff, and trailed my fingers against the charred wooden remains of a target. Bringing them close to my face, I took a whiff and immediately let out a noise of surprise.

"Aha," Sapper-General Pickler of the High Ridge Tribe enthused, popping out without warning. "You get it, then. I knew you would."

She forgot to tack on even a ma'am at the end, but I was excited enough it barely registered.

"That wasn't done by sorcery," I said. "There's no ozone smell, like there would be with an enchanted stone blowing up."

Having appeared out of hole in the ground – not metaphorically, it'd been an actual hole and she'd been in it – Pickler offered me an excited grin that was like a clacking mouthful of white needles. Like Robber she'd aged, yet while like him her face had grown gaunter her frame had actually thickened. She was only a little taller than the last time we'd seen each other, but her shoulders and hips had grown broader. Her amber eyes looked even larger, now that the skin was pulled taut around them, and they shone with manic zeal.

"It's Light," she said, confirming my guess.

I let out a low whistle.

"We've been trying to get that to work for years," I said, honestly impressed. "Multiples stones were fired here, Pickler.

You really managed to get several shots out without scrapping the engine?"

Stones with a Light infusion weren't new, everyone under the sun had used those at some point. They'd been a known part of Calernian arsenals since the First Crusade, when trying to take heavily warded Praesi cities with inferior mages had forced the crusading armies to find an alternative to simply dying by the dozens of thousands storming the walls. The problem with those munitions was that they tended to wreck whatever siege engine they were thrown out of, as Light was highly unstable when shoved into things. There was a reason the foremost artisan in Light of our generation was the Blessed Artificer, who'd gotten a fucking *Name* out of her skill at it.

Usually larger stones were more stable, so trebuchets and catapults could be relied on to toss a dozen stones before being seriously damaged. It made their use viable. The smaller the engines got, though, the more the Light in the projectiles screwed with them. Scorpions and ballistas were sometimes made unusable by as much as a *single* shot, the javelins and stones having bent the wood they were on. The Lycaonese, who loved ballistas as much as the Legions of Terror – even though they used dwarven models, the poor fuckers – had long been bitter about this, as they could not afford to buy replacements and lacked the mages to turn to a magical solution instead.

"We have to put a copper casing on the stones," Pickler hedged, "but once that safety is observed, yes. It had been an unequivocal success, Catherine. And the amount of Light that emanates is battle-appropriate, it has a decent shot of destroying even a construct."

"Gods Below, Pickler," I laughed out. "That..."

Changed things, to put it lightly. Most constructs were too damned quick to be threatened by something like this, and those that weren't were much too *big*, but the amount of Light she was talking about would utterly wreck most undead infantry. It might even finally give us a way to deal with the Grey Legion that wasn't 'soldiers praying Akua, the Witch or me got there in time'. Even Hanno had found those fuckers a hard nut to crack.

"I thought it might please," my Sapper-General said, smiling a smile as girlish as goblin teeth allowed.

It would have made a cat flinch, I suspected. And wisely so, given that goblins liked them in a stew.

"It has," I said, almost touching her shoulder before I refrained.

It, uh, was usually taken as an advance by goblins. Robber had been trained out of that by his years rubbing elbows with other races, but Pickler wasn't as social.

"Have supper with me tonight," I said. "You can tell me more about it there. But until then?"

She watched me, amber eyes alight with expectation.

"Take what you need, Sapper-General," I grinned, wolfish. "On my authority, requisition any bloody thing you need to make sure we have as many of those modified ballistas and... copperstones as we can when we march."

She didn't protest the name, improvised as it was, so it might just stick. The two of us grinned at each other again, and it felt like the day had gotten just a little bit lighter.

—

I swung by my tent, afterwards, to follow through on what I'd just promised. I doubted Pickler was going to be shy with requisitions if she was rushing things before our departure, so I'd better ensure she actually had the recognized authority to make those. Thankfully Adjutant was waiting there, seated in his wheelchair and dictating notes to three attendants in the green-and-grey livery that signified they were directly in his service. Two humans and one goblin, I noted, by the looks of it a young Soninke woman and an older Callowan man.

All three bore a discreet painted iron pin in the form of a curled skeletal hand pointing its index, the enchantment laid on it serving only to prove it was authentic. On the rolls these constantly-swelling ranks were called the adjunct secretariat, and their stated purpose was to serve as a mix of my personal bureaucracy and messengers. And while they did serve those purposes, and well, that was only the official part of their duties. In practice people had taken to calling the 'phalanges' after the pins, and they served as Hakram's eyes and hands.

Some of them had been invested with authority on my behalf, able to make inspections of Callowan and Grand Alliance property and soldiers to unearth treason and corruption, but there was also an entire armed wing that'd expanded out of the first tenth of legionaries I'd long ago put under Adjutant to ferret out Heiress' rats in the Fifteenth.

Grandmaster Talbot had approached me and expressed, in confidence, a degree of unease over 'the Adjutant's private army of soldiers, sneaks and scribes'. If he'd know that Hakram had heavily recruited from the parts of the Assassin's Guild that'd not been a good fit for the Jacks, I suspected he would have been outright worried. I'd appeased the commander of my knights by

assuring him there were non-negotiable limits to the amount of coin dedicated to the adjunct secretariat, which would restrict its size permanently after a little more growth.

I got the sense Talbot had wanted some Callowan oversight over the phalanges, either through Vivienne or my Queen's Council – though the latter would have probably meant Vivienne also, given that my Council was currently in Laure and answering to Duchess Kegan – but that wasn't going to be happening. When I abdicated I'd be taking the phalanges with me to Cardinal, so I wasn't interested in giving Callow too deep a peek at their inner workings. If I wanted them to survive as a Cardinal institution, I couldn't let them slide into being just a chapter of the Jacks by another name.

The three phalanges saluted as I limped in, but I gestured for them to keep jotting down Hakram's orders as I made my way to my liquor cabinet and poured myself a celebratory finger of aragh. The copperstone munitions were worth a drink for more than me, I decided, so after a moment I poured a finger for Adjutant as well.

"- and have another look into Captain Garrick," Adjutant said. "That's twice now he's splashed coin around, we still don't know if it's inheritance or he's been taking bribes."

The goblin licked her lips, as the others nodded.

"And my own find?" she asked.

"The Jacks have been in touch, she's already one of their informants in the ranks and she warned them of the contact," Hakram said, sounding chagrined. "Start over with another company."

I sipped at my aragh, watching as he finished the last round of instructions and dismissed them. They saluted, first to me and then to him, and within moments we were left alone. I pressed the small cup into his only hand, the skeletal one Masego's father had crafted from him what felt like a lifetime ago. The orc – still so tall, even wheelchair-bound – let out an approving rumble. We clinked our glasses and drank.

"Pickler's work proved worth all the mess?" he asked afterwards.

"And more," I replied. "She managed to get Light-infused projectiles working for ballistas, though she has to tinker up both. Dips the stones in copper, which means they'll be hard to make out on the campaign trail."

Hakram's eyes widened, his fangs clicking together thoughtfully.

"That is fine news indeed," he said. "We only have enough goblin munitions stockpiled for one last campaign, even used sparingly, so a substitute is long overdue."

More like two pitched battles than a whole campaign, in my opinion, and I wanted to keep a decent quantity at hand for when we moved on the capital so really more for one battle. Our initial hopes that the Confederation of the Grey Eyries would be able to push out the Matron who'd betrayed them, currently styled High Lady Wither of Foramen, out of said city had turned out to be... overly optimistic. Wither had little Legion support, but the Confederation's armies weren't the kind that could take a Praesi city except by surprise.

Which High Lady Wither wasn't going to fall for, since she'd taken the city this way from both her predecessors the Banu and then the Confederation itself.

The Grey Eyries were hardly at risk of falling, since the traitor tribes couldn't really afford to chance anything aside from a defence of their seized territories, but without control of Foramen the Confederation could no longer sell us goblin munitions. Some mountain routes had been opened but the quantities that could be taken through them were paltry and the Eyries themselves were full of creatures that preyed on goblins. We still got the occasional wagons from Callow, as much from old Legion caches as what the goblins got to us, but it wasn't enough.

I'd forbidden use of munitions, lest attrition at the defensive line empty our stock long before a decisive battle could be fought.

"Agreed," I said. "I ordered her to stock up as much as she can of both ballistas and copperstones, so she'll need my seal and a Grand Alliance warrant."

He nodded.

"It would be polite to inform the other commanders in advance, since she might requisition from them," Hakram reminded me. "No need for much, just a courtesy letter."

"I suppose," I muttered.

Might as well smooth the feathers before they ever got ruffled if it could be done. Bone fingers came to rest on the side of the wheelchair, clutching around the grip, and Adjutant wheeled himself to the side. Tried to, anyway – the left wheel got caught on a rock that'd bene pushed into the ground, and while the chair was too well-built to flip it did get stuck. Hakram grunted with effort as he tried to force it, but all it did was get the rock stuck between the wheel and the protective sheathing as earth

sprayed. I stood paralyzed, wanting to help but certain he'd take it as an insult. He finally let go with a half-swallowed roar, the dead hand slamming down onto the arm of the wheelchair.

Hakram looked to the side, as if unwilling to face me.

"I can send back for secretaries," I delicately said.

Some part of me dimly suspected that my helping him instead would go over very poorly. It... wasn't how we did things. Never had been.

"No," Adjutant roughly said. "The seal and warrants are under lock, and there's none close that have the clearance to touch them."

"An exception can be made once," I tried. "While we are here."

His fingers clenched until even the enchanted wood under them creaked.

"I *wrote* those safety rules, Catherine," Hakram bit out. "I won't break them because of a fucking rock."

Quietly I drew on Night, wondering if I could slip a tendril near the chair and-

"Stop that," Adjutant sharply said.

Lips thinning, I released the power. I did neither of us the disservice or pretending I didn't know what he was talking about.

"It will be easier when the prosthetics come from the Arsenal," he tiredly said. "I'll be out of the chair, able to walk again. It will take longer to be able to fight but-"

"Hakram," I said.

"There are shields built for men with only one hand, Catherine," he told me. "I have looked into the matter. It will take training, but it can be done."

My heart clenched, but I couldn't just let him keep on telling himself that lie.

"Hakram," I quietly repeated, "you know it can't be like that. It's done, the old fights. Maybe in a few years you'll be able to handle soldiers, but not Named. Not for a long time, if ever again."

He'd have to make a fighting style nearly from scratch, learn to compensate for several glaring weaknesses while having few strengths to call on. It wasn't impossible, and men that had half his courage and discipline went back to fighting after losing a

hand, but he'd lost a great deal more than that. Prosthetics relying on magic would make him brutally vulnerable to heroes that could wield Light, which was most of them, and a skilled mage without even a Name would be able to meddle with the enchantments on them.

"I will not be put out to pasture, Catherine," Hakram rasped out. "I won't allow it."

"I haven't stopped relying on you," I insisted. "You lost some aptitude in swinging around a stick with steel stuck onto it, that's all. If anything I'm running you too hard, considering you're recovering from severe wounds."

He studied me for a moment, dark eyes calm and all too knowing.

"You are closing the door," Adjutant said. "To my ever standing by your side in battle again."

I opened my mouth to argue, hadn't I *just* said that – but he raised his hand, and so I swallowed my tongue.

"Maybe not with words," Hakram said. "Or with deeds. But in the back of your head, you have."

My lips thinned. I'd never liked being told what it was that I was supposedly thinking, even coming from my closest friend in the world.

"You know my aspects," the orc tiredly said. "One felt mockery, when it sunk in what I had lost, but then I thought it might instead turn into a key."

Rampage, Find, *Stand*. The last must have felt like a bitter joke after losing his leg. With the way the Severance's cut had carved into his hipbone, he couldn't even try to get around on crutches – even with painkillers the pain was simply horrendous. Only surgical spells that deadened pain worked, and those could damage nerves if they were kept on for too long.

"But it hasn't," I said.

"It is fading," Hakram replied, then corrected himself. "No, perhaps not quite that drastic. Losing luster? Losing potency, certainly. As if there was no longer a call for me to use it, or a place where I would."

My stomach dropped. He was implying that I no longer thought of him as someone who'd fight by my side – and Gods, I had carefully kept the words out of my mouth but they were not untrue – so his Name, ever so bound to my service, was no longer trying to help him in that purpose. Even when he wanted it to. I drew back as if

struck. It was only a theory, this, but Adjutant had good instincts. And it had that damning ring of truth to it.

"I haven't," I blurted. "I mean, I can't..."

I did not quite know what I was trying to say, and an odd shame was eating at me from the inside for it.

"I am not accusing you of malice," Adjutant spoke into my flustered silence. "Or trying to shame you. But you were not going to admit it unless told. And now that you know, perhaps if you shape your thoughts..."

I hesitantly nodded.

"I don't know if it would work," he admitted. "If it *can*. But what else is there but to try?"

Making peace with having lost something, I wanted to reply, but how could I? It was serving me he'd lost it, while I was getting clever playing shatranj with the Intercessor. Now I was looking at the consequences of my decision every day, and it was not a pretty thing to behold.

"You need a helper while we're out there," I forced out. "Someone who'll take care of little things for you and keep an eye out for enemies. Neshamah will come after you, he knows how important you are to the war."

And to me, which would have been enough for the Hidden Horror to aim for his head without all the other good reasons for it.

"I have my secretaries," Hakram replied. "Some of them have better grips on swords than quills."

"You need more than that," I said. "I've talked with the Silver Huntress and then with the girl herself: the Apprentice could be suborned to you for the offensive, to learn from you and lend a hand."

It'd been surreal looking at some slip of a girl from Ashur bearing Masego's Name, much less one who considered herself a heroine, but I'd managed. The Apprentice badly wanted a term of service in the Arsenal, and I'd offered it a bribe after this campaign if she accepted. She'd still get lessons from the Sage, it was the reason she was out here on the front in the first place, but the hours would have been cut while we were on war footing anyway so serving as Hakram's assistant would not be to her detriment.

It also put a skilled practitioner by his side during most of the day. The Apprentice had previously been studying with an eye to become the Silver Mage, one of the Ashuran wizardly mantles, but

she'd abandoned the healing arts after most her teachers got killed during the sack of Smyrna. She'd picked up a lot of quick and cheap war magic since signing onto the Truce, and while her spellcasting was still pretty simple it was also swift and highly destructive. Nothing short of a Revenant ought to trouble her if she saw it coming.

"And what did it cost you to convince the girl?" the orc drily asked.

I shrugged. We both knew I wasn't above sweetening the pot for someone when it served my purposes. I could read him well enough to know that the offer wasn't making him happy, but he didn't refuse outright.

"I'll think about it," Hakram finally said. "That's all I can give you."

I bit my lip, tempted to push since I sensed he was leaning more towards accepting than refusing. If I gave him too much time to ponder, though, he might just talk himself out of it. I breathed out. Trust, I told myself. We weren't going to get through this intact without trust.

"Have an answer for me before we set out," I nodded. "I'll want to speak with the White Knight before making the final arrangements."

"I will," Adjutant gravelled, then hesitated.

He sagged into the seat, as if tension had drifted out of him.

"I'll take care of the warrant and seal," he said. "I only need one hand to fake your signature."

"I leave it in your hands, then," I said, then paused. "And Hakram?"

He turned darks eyes onto me.

"I love you," I said. "You know that, right?"

The orc breathed out.

"I know," he said.

I'd not asked for forgiveness and he'd not given it. It wasn't in me to ask, and he'd be insulted if I did. But it was something, to say the words. A paltry offering, I couldn't help but think as I left my tent, but what else did I have to give?

—

When the moon rose, it found me once more standing at the edge of the roof.

Summer heat had lingered even after dark, the breeze bringing the distant scent of the swamplands in the distance. Green and mud and life, all intertwined with something like sweet rot. I stood at the edge, letting the wind curl around me, and closed my eyes. I flinched in pain a moment later. Like nails driven into my temples. It wasn't an attack, I realized, but a Night-working. One I'd laid myself as a precaution two years back. I pulled back the string of it again, but left the working in place.

"The trick's not quite as good," I said, "once you know what to look for."

Her steps were quiet, but not so quiet I did not hear her deftly make her way down the tiles to stand at my side. First time I'd ever caught her out, wasn't it? My contingency must have triggered when I'd closed my eyes, prompted by a power I'd not noticed and had felt entirely like my own whim. What a dangerous aspect hers was.

"The same can be said of all tricks," the Scribe replied.

This, I suspected, was going to be an interesting talk.

Chapter 50: Mores

"Villains often try to get clever, to stump me with philosophical questions like 'what is evil?' To which I answer 'generally, people asking me that question', which somehow they never see coming."

— Aldred Alban of Callow, the Prince Errant

The moon hung above us like a nasty grin, the drop was precipitously close and past the lights of the stronghold below there was only a dark and desolate stretch: a proper backdrop for ominous talks with a woman that was neither a friend nor an enemy. The Scribe had picked her moment and her place with care, I decided, to frame this conversation in the way she preferred. And what did we do, when an opponent expressed a preference?

"Eudokia," I warmly smiled. "How lovely to see you, it's been much too long. How have you been?"

That's right: slit open its throat and set the corpse aflame. Scribe showed no visible sign of surprise and what little I could see of her from the corner of my eye, ink-stained hands and/

/Gods Below and Everburning but I hated that fucking aspect. Even knowing about it the best I could do was work around the effect.

Trying to remember anything about her was like clutching sand, with the same few grains left behind every time. Still, even though I might as well try to read emotion into a puff of mist the beat of silence that followed smacked of surprise to me.

"I have been well," Scribe said, then paused. "... and you?"

"Oh, you know, doing this and that," I drawled. "Been thinking about getting another pair of boots, since mine are a getting worn, but I like the leather better soft."

Befuddled silence in the face of my boot-talk – a real decision in need of making, actually, and one I'd be willing to hear her advice on – followed and I swallowed a grin. When I'd been a girl the Calamities had seemed like all powerful figures of legend, and by the time I'd learned better most of them had died. It was deeply satisfying for the kid I'd once been that the woman I now was could afford to screw with one of them like this.

"I approached you to speak on matters of grave import," Scribe said.

"It better not be the Dead King, then," I idly said. "I won't stand for puns, Eudokia. Debated making them illegal once, you know, but it was a little too Sanguinia the Second."

What a brave soul, that one. I too would outlaw being taller than me, if it wasn't certain to lead to the rebellion of an insultingly large portion of Callow. Aside from the deep satisfaction inherent to pulling the leg of someone I was on less than decent terms with, I did have a purpose to this. Scribe had spent a very long time in Black's shadow, hidden by its span but also *protected*. She'd been the monster in the night, or at least on its side, for so long she'd no longer be used to being toyed with.

That was going to piss her off, I was betting, and anger always made you sloppy. If she was running a game on me, why shouldn't I run one on her right back?

"Lack of discipline was always your greatest flaw," Scribe curtly replied. "I came in good faith-"

I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth.

"You came here to use me," I easily corrected. "And that's fine, so long as I also have a use for you. But don't pretend you're doing me favours, Eudokia. We both know coming here isn't your first choice."

A shot in the dark but one I was confident about. Black had decisively cut her loose from his service after learning she'd acted behind his back to ensure he would be forced to fight

Malicia, and while I'd not forgotten the low he'd hit that night he wasn't one to walk back a decision so severe. At a guess, she'd tried to mend the bridge with him and been rebuffed. What interested me was what else she might have been up to in the meanwhile: it'd been two years since the Salian Peace.

If I'd been right about her relationship with my father remaining a wreck she didn't show it. With her first approach – the one lending her importance, I now grasped, making her seem if not like an equal then at least someone of power and influence – having stumbled, she smoothly pivoted to another.

"If you are not interested in the information I have to bring, then you need simply say so," Scribe said. "I can depart."

Transparent, but a ploy didn't have to be subtle to be effective. Likely she was well aware that the most I'd gotten out of the Wasteland was wild rumours and some of the ups and downs of the civil war between Malicia and Sepulchral. I was thirsting for news there, and she knew it. But she was after something too, wasn't she? Her first tack tonight had been one that leant her presence, weight, but that wasn't something she'd need if this was a simple transaction.

She wanted something from me, something that perhaps I wouldn't want to give. So she'd puffed up like a bird trying to look bigger for a predator and hoped it'd give me pause. That made it clear what my answer needed to be to her challenge.

"The closest gate is that way," I replied without hesitating, jutting a thumb west. "If you hurry you'll have enough of a head start the Pilgrim won't bother to pursue."

Tension hung in the air in the moment that followed. It'd been a tactical mistake to make a bluff I was willing to call so early in the game. Now there was no recovering her position. I turned a sharp, toothy grin onto the Scribe.

"Yeah," I murmured. "I didn't think so. So why you don't you tell me what you came here to say, only without all the empty posturing."

Anger. I could hardly even look at her, much less read her, but I felt anger wafting off Scribe's silhouette like smoke. Whether it was at me for being bluntly high-handed or at herself for the missteps I didn't know, and probably didn't matter. The gesture stiff, she reached into her robes and removed three small letters. She handed me the first and I opened the fold, scanning the contents. It was tradertalk – the eastern dialect of it, peppered with Aenian terms – excerpts with translations into Lower Miezán.

"Leo Trakas is dead and half Nicae a ruin," I frowned. "The undead mentioned there, from Malicia's fleet?"

Originally the war fleet of Nicae, but use of Still Waters had seen to that.

"To an extent," Scribe replied. "Supporters of Strategos Zenobia opened a gate in the night and let in her troops as well as a contingent of Helikeans under General Basilia herself. The conspirators promised them a bloodless victory, so when the wights attacked the Helikeans claimed treachery. In the chaos parts of the city were torched and sacked until Basilia restored order personally."

I hummed thoughtfully. The First Prince's diplomacy had borne fruit, then. I'd thought it drastic to condemn Leo Trakas as an ally of the Dead King, and only reluctantly voted in favour when the moment came, but Hasenbach had been right: it'd moved enough people to turn on him for the stalemate to turn in our favour without troops needing to be sent. Nicae falling wasn't only good news, though. Stygia had been quietly meddling to keep the wars within the League going, but with one of them settled the Magisterium might just come out swinging.

"So Zenobia's crowning herself a princess?" I snorted, reading the last excerpt. "That's new."

That came an intercepted Nicaean courier, so it probably reliable. It was also noted that several of the Trakas from lesser branches had escaped Zenobia's attempted purge of the family after the fall of the city, which was a Name in the making if I'd ever seen one. I found it mildly amusing that she'd discarded the title of Strategos for something more royal, but it wasn't of great import: the office had essentially ruled Nicae like a royal house for decades, and I had doubts she'd make bloodline inheritance stick. Royalty wasn't unknown in the Free Cities, Kairos himself had been king of-

I paused, then frowned.

"Basilia still hasn't crowned herself queen, has she?" I asked.

"She has not," Scribe confirmed.

Was she really *that* ambitious? Zenobia had been backed to the throne by General Basilia, but when she'd given herself a royal title it had only been that of *princess*. Why not queen, if she had royal ambitions?

"Fuck me," I murmured. "That's why Basilia doesn't care Stygia's an enemy, why she sent me all the letters making clear they're the provocative ones. She doesn't want to avoid that war at all,

and she's not a queen only because she wants to be a bloody empress."

Empress Basilia the First, with her vassal Princess Zenobia of Nicae and whoever she'd end up installing as puppets after she toppled the Magisterium and finished off Penthes. I was impressed but also skeptical. She'd managed the politics of this well, since no one in the Free Cities could really ally with her enemies without siding with either Stygian aggression or Malicia's southern meddling, but the Spears of Stygia were a fine army and the Helikean host bloodied.

"If we survive Keter," I sighed, "the next great war will come out of some damned foolish thing in the Free Cities."

I took the second letter when it was offered to me. Tradertalk again, but this time towards the Ashuran end of the stick. I couldn't parse the High Tyrian any better than the Aenian, but at least I got the Mtethwa loanwords. We'd known for some time that Magon Hadast, the ruler of the Thalassocracy was dead, that was old news. Killed by Assassin, if the Augur was to be believed. Bitter disagreements had since kept Ashur from recovering from its defeats at League and Praesi hands, but the nature of those had been opaque to even Cordelia's spies abroad, the Circle of Thorns. Not so for Scribe's people, it seemed.

"So it's a glorified inheritance dispute," I bluntly said.

"The dignitaries in the two camps often divide their allegiances by provenance from Arwad or Smyrna," Scribe noted. "It speaks to a deeper divide in Ashuran society."

The Arwad committees mentioned tended to be from slightly lower tiers, I noted, and many sounded mercantile in nature. They were backing a distant relative of Magon Hadast for ascension to their highest citizenship tier by virtue of blood, since the main Hadast line had been extinguished. The man in question had married a noblewoman from Levant, though, which disqualified him in the eyes of the Smyrna crowd. They wanted instead to send a ship across the Tyrian Sea to import a ruler from Ashur's nominal overlord, the Baalite Hegemony.

So far the conflict had seen no battles, only skirmishing in streets and countryside, but by the looks of it positions were hardening on both sides. I could not help but note that by the sounds of it an awful lot of people with the last name Hadast had died not too long after good ol' Magon himself.

"Assassin's work?" I asked.

"Evidently, without orders he went... somewhat overboard," Scribe said. "He was caught and slain by the Blue Mage last year."

I rolled my eyes.

"And I'm sure *this* time it took," I drawled. "Pull the other one. Where is he?"

"I've not been in contact since he set out for Ashur," Scribe replied.

I eyed her skeptically but let it go. If I was to start digging at that particular secret, it wouldn't be in so haphazard a manner. Without a word I was handed the third letter. This time it was Lower Miezan, and a simple phrase 'the crown was obtained' along with a bell and day noted. I mastered my surprise, slowly folding the paper back. Fuck. I'd hoped we would keep the Eyes, if not entirely out of the Arsenal, then at least out of the most critical projects. I now had evidence otherwise.

"It went well?" I calmly said, as if this was not an unpleasant turn.

"I had no eyes at the location," Scribe said, "It was a scried report that was intercepted, and I expect it is making its way towards you as we speak. The ritual appears to have been a success and the nearby gate is still functional."

I pushed down the urge to snatch her by the throat and dangle her above the drop until I got names. It wouldn't accomplish anything, I reminded myself. Angering her was one thing, but an attack was another. I had no need to cement an enmity tonight. Not yet, anyway.

"You've made your point," I noted. "You know our allies better than we do, your people have access places where we don't and you have eyes even in the Grand Alliance's most guarded sanctum. Now that you've proved you have something to bargain with, what is it you want to bargain *for*?"

Scribe went silent for a moment.

"I wish to sign onto the Truce and Terms," she said.

I snorted, ignoring what I suspected was an unfriendly look my derision earned.

"There was no need for the song and dance to get that," I said. "And we both know signing won't open many doors for you."

The First Prince had not put a bounty on her head, but according to Vivienne she'd also put the matter of forbidding such a thing to the Highest Assembly and purposefully lost the vote. Both the Proceran House of Light and more than a few highborn wanted Scribe's head on a pike for the mess in Salia, and the Principate

wouldn't stand for her gaining access to Grand Alliance secrets even as a signatory were I inclined to push for it. I was not.

"You picked a fight tonight aiming for *something*, Scribe," I continued. "So out with it."

She sighed.

"I was not picking a fight," the Webweaver replied. "I was making a bid for a position."

My brow rose and I almost laughed until I realized she was deadly serious. Gods Below, I thought, how badly had it gone with Black for her to come to *me*? We weren't exactly bosom friends, Eudokia and I. My reflex was to refuse her, and not politely, but I tamped down on it.

"I have questions," I mildly said.

"Understandable."

Interrogating one of the most skillful living spymistresses of Calernia would require skill and subtlety, I mused. Unfortunately I lacked those, so best swing the other way around entirely.

"What have you been doing for two years?" I bluntly asked.

"Fighting for control of the Eyes of the Empire," she frankly admitted. "I knew Ime would overtake me closer to Praes, so I concentrated on taking over the edges of the network and damaging records in the Wasteland so she wouldn't know what was lost. My agents were purged or suborned most places east of the Whitecaps, but elsewhere I have established control."

Fuck, I thought. That meant Malicia was firmly back in control of the Eyes in Callow, not exactly great news. Still, at least I'd gotten a list of imperial agents in my kingdom from Scribe as reparations during the negotiations for the Salian Peace. Duchess Kegan had sent the Watch to purge everyone on it when I'd passed it on, so at least the foothold of the Empire would be damaged. It also meant that the leader of the largest spy network on Calernia not directly in service of a crown was standing next to me. Worth a second look, that.

"If you're going to try to sell me you didn't reach out to Black, you'll need a better pitch," I noted.

I felt her breathe in even if I didn't see it.

"How casually you pick at the wounds of others," Scribe said. "Of course I sought him out, Catherine. I still have the scar from where Ranger's arrow took me. Half an inch to the side of the heart. She likes to think she's funny, you see."

I shared a moment of silent appreciation with her about just how much of an asshole the Lady of the Lake was. I suspected she didn't even have to try, it just came naturally to her.

"He was quite apologetic about the arrow," Scribe sighed. "But there would be no making amends."

I frowned. That... did not sound like Black. It was a half-done job, and he abhorred those. She was leaving things out. I said nothing, only cocking an eyebrow. Eudokia sighed again.

"He said he had done me wrong, by taking me into his service," Scribe murmured. "That his ambitions had devoured mine, and we'd both suffered for it."

I almost winced. That sounded more like my father, admittedly: genuine care, but handed out along with brutal honesty.

"He won't have left it at that," I encouraged.

"You must find your own way," Eudokia softly quoted, "your own ambition. And I hope that, when you have, one day our paths will lead us to standing side by side again."

I breathed out in surprise. That walked the fine line between kindness and cruelty. And now, having eked out as much of a victory as she could in the war for the rule of the Eyes, Scribe had come here. A colder part of me noted she'd missed Black's point entirely, if she'd come looking for another master to follow. But cold wasn't always right, was it? My Winter days had made that much exceedingly clear. And my father could preach whatever he wanted, but he wasn't the one making decisions for Scribe.

"You think we're going to head east, don't you?" I said.

I felt her smile.

"Or the east will come to you," she shrugged. "It makes no difference."

I thoughtfully hummed. I glanced down at the drop, leaning forward, and felt my stomach clench. There was a weight to the air tonight. Not a pivot, no. It wasn't enough for that. But this would... matter. Reverberate. I let the fear of the fall sink into me, clear away all idle thoughts. It was refreshing, in a way. And it made how the choice needed to be made crystal clear.

"Would you betray me to him, if the call came?" I asked.

"Probably," Scribe replied without batting an eye.

I smiled.

"Ah," I said, "but would you betray me to anyone else?"

She chuckled.

"What would they have to offer me?" the Webweaver asked.

"Good," I said.

I withdrew from the edge.

"I expect you in my tent at Morning Bell," I said. "I'll want a full report on the Praesi situation then. See Adjutant about signing onto the Terms and your assigned lodgings."

Her control wavered for a moment, overtaken by shock.

"You do not jest," Eudokia stated, sounding surprised.

I turned to her and gently smiled.

"I'm not seventeen anymore, Scribe," I said. "I'm already using people a lot more dangerous than you."

I turned my gaze back the night sky, the dismissal clear, and she quietly withdrew.

—

An hour before Morning Bell, my effective royal council these days sat around the sculpted table in my tent with steaming mugs in everyone's hands. It was early, so Indrani looked haggard even as she sipped at her Nicean blackleaf tea, liberally flavoured with honey. She'd been out drinking late, and though not hungover she was a little ragged. Hakram's own mug was filled with a fragrant gift of the First Prince – Hasenbach had noticed he enjoyed her abominably spicy brews and sent him a small coffer full of assorted leaves – and he'd deigned to share with Akua, who these days took more pleasure in scent than taste.

I'd stood on a rooftop like an ass for an hour last night, so unsurprisingly I was now drinking Masego's personal brew for pain and hoping my leg wouldn't swell too much.

"The Crows are keeping an eye out," I said, "so we can feel free to talk."

"Ominous," Indrani grunted. "What are we on about, Cat?"

"Hakram already knows some of it," I said, nodding at the orc. "Last night I was approached by Scribe."

Akua leaned back into her seat, looking interested,

"News from the Wasteland at last?" she said. "I had wondered at the continued silence from the Carrion Lord."

"Not exactly," I said.

"The Scribe has signed onto the Truce and Terms," Hakram said. "Or she would have, if I'd then passed on the parchments properly. They were mislaid."

No one here bothered to comment how unlikely it was for someone with Adjutant's quite literally supernatural organisational abilities to lose anything this important.

"You want to open her throat?" Indrani asked, sounding surprised. "Thought you were keeping a light touch with the east."

More like I couldn't afford to take a hard stance with the east, considering that most of Callow's armies were abroad and wouldn't be returning anytime soon. Vivienne and I had been clear with Kegan: there'd be no rolling over for the Tower, but neither should she go on the offensive. Considering the largest military force still in the kingdom was the Duchess of Daoine's own army, she'd not been hard to sell on that.

"Scribe requested a position under me," I informed them, though Hakram had already known. "No word was spoken of Callow in particular, and I suspect that she is a great deal more interested by my position in the Grand Alliance than my crown."

"So you want our advice on whether to accept?" Indrani mused.

Akua's golden eyes narrowed.

"She already has," dark-skinned shade said. "She is simply uncertain as to whether or not she meant it."

I raised my mug in a toast.

"In an hour, the Scribe will enter this tent to give us a report on the state of the Dread Empire," I said. "I want your opinion on, when she finishes, whether I should give her a position or slit her throat."

That got me some surprise, but I thought more at the bluntness of the statement than the morality inherent. I wasn't a fool, so there'd be no talk of keeping Scribe prisoner and extracting information out of her – she'd escape, sure as night, and be out for revenge. If I could not use her, could not employ her within the frame of the Terms, then she needed to die. Quickly, cleanly and without fuss. I let my words sink in for a moment, then glanced at Indrani with a cocked brow. She sipped at her tea a little longer, then snorted.

"Slice her," Archer frankly said. "She's too dangerous, and she'll never be loyal to you or anything you make. We can deal with that when it's a nobody villain, but she ain't one of those. She's got spies and gold and skeletons in people's closets – best she's taken off the board before you found your Cardinal. We don't really need her, anyway."

"One can never have too many spies, Indrani," Akua chided her.

"Come off it, Dressing Ghoul," Archer replied, rolling her eyes. "I'm not going to pretend the Jacks are the sharpest operation out there or that it's not awkward to rely on Procer for the goods, but what does more sneaks really *do* for us? It's useful, sure but it doesn't bring anything new to the table."

"According to the first reports she's fed us," Adjutant said, "she has eyes in Ashur. We yet lack those, and it is the same for the First Prince."

"Look," Indrani said, "I'm not trying to be an asshole here. I've got nothing against Scribe. But *Ashur*, really? When the fuck was the last time those guys mattered? It scratches our nosy itches to learn what happens there, but the poor bastards are out of the war. Who cares what goes on there? On the other hand, she's the godsdamned Scribe. You let her into something like the Terms and she'll be handling half our villains' money by the end of the year and reading the letters of the rest."

That was a fair point, I mentally noted. Scribe would take to the Terms and their intended successor, the Accords, much like a fish to water. That wasn't necessarily a *good* thing. Archer as underselling her value as an asset, though, in my opinion. Still, I'd decided before starting this talk that I'd hold my piece until I'd gotten the advice I asked for.

"The Carrion Lord ruled Callow for two decades without ever having a formal capital," Akua said. "I have been heiress to a High Seat and Imperial Governess, so believe me when I say that is deranged. That such a nomadic bureaucracy was even attempted is absurd, but that it *worked* is testament to the sheer use that can be had from someone like the Scribe."

"So she's real good at paperwork," Indrani said, sounding skeptical. "Hooray. We get us a shitty, untrustworthy Hakram. There's a coup worth the trouble, Gauzy Ghost."

"We have not yet identified through what agent the Wandering Bard managed to incite the Mirror Knight and his allies to head for the Arsenal," Akua pointed out. "The Jacks don't have the formation to attempt an investigation like this, and the heroes have produced no results on their own. That is already a use for the Scribe, and hardly the only one there is."

"She's expressed enmity for the Intercessor before," Hakram gravelled. "I'd agree we can rely on her against a common enemy, at least."

"Look," Indrani sighed, "I'm not going to argue for an hour we need to open her throat. It's starting to feel like I'm going after her, when I don't particularly want her dead. You wanted my opinion, Cat, and you got it: she's a risk, and I don't see what she brings to the table that warrants taking it."

I slowly nodded, drinking of my herbal brew, then turned an expectant gaze onto Akua.

"Killing her would be unwise," Akua said. "For one, it would have consequences: villains would hesitate to sign onto the Terms, if they knew being snuffed out was a possibility should they be judged unfit."

"The Scribe attempted to infiltrate our camp before the offensive and resisted when caught," Adjutant mildly said. "We had no choice but to kill her. In can have every written evidence otherwise burned within a quarter hour and she's only dealt in person with the adjunct secretariat. Secrecy is possible."

"Hasenbach isn't going to argue with her corpse, that's for sure," Indrani snorted. "She's dreamed of seeing it often enough. The Highest Assembly might even throw us a parade."

"The Dominion has no reason to care," Hakram added. "And even less to investigate. Praesi villainy is largely seen as our backyard, and ours to deal with as we see fit."

"The Terms are a covenant of Named, not nations," Akua replied. "Belief in it has already been undermined by the second trial of the Red Axe and the prior wave of betrayals in the Arsenal. Further fraying the fabric of it without a decent motive, which I have yet to hear, would be irresponsible."

"She has a significant portion of the Eyes, Akua," Adjutant calmly said. "And we have no real understanding of what she wants, or what loyalties she keeps. Her Name will thrive in the environment of both the Terms and the Accords – practically speaking, she represents an immediate threat because she is a way for villains to gain and consolidate power that we have no control over."

"She did not approach as a contender for influence, Hakram," Akua said. "She requested a position *under* Catherine. Scribe can and should be considered a potential threat, but those are thin grounds to kill on. Even more so when those very same qualities that make her a threat also make her a potential asset of great worth."

Which wasn't wrong. Unlike Akua, I'd actually ruled Callow. She significantly underestimated how difficult it had been for Black to rule the kingdom on the move, even with the imperial governors handling most local matters. It was telling that our most comprehensive record of Callowan laws and noble privileges wasn't the old Fairfax records that'd survived the Conquest but a neat set of manuscripts titled with the numbers I to VI in Scribe's personal handwriting. She'd put together the records of half a hundred families and the House of Light so well that even Kegan, who despised everything Praesi, was in favour of having the books copied and used to govern.

"Thought you'd be all about strangling the viper before it could bite, Akua, I'm not gonna lie," Archer frowned. "This isn't about how we picked you up, is it? Because that's not the same at all. Look, you were a bloody horror back in the day and our resident Callowans are still going to scrape you raw for it – but you're not like *Scribe*."

She leaned forward, earnest.

"We wouldn't off you like that," Indrani assured her. "It's been a few years since we got past that. Hells, I'd probably miss you some if you got your ass exorcised."

Coming from Indrani that was actually a pretty warm endorsement.

"While I am touched, Archer," Akua drily replied, "I am not so confused or sentimental."

"Refraining from killing her out of fear of it being outed *is* acting on sentiment," Adjutant gravelled. "If not in the sense you implied."

"So is acting to kill Scribe out fear of what she might do," she replied without batting an eye. "We do not know her desires, what of it? Few allies are so helpful as to tell us these outright, and we have other Named just as dangerous in our menagerie of the damned."

"If we come in conflict with the Carrion Lord, or he is made hostage-" Hakram began.

"- would we not act in accord with the man regardless, or seek to free him?" Akua interrupted. "Let us not pretend we seek enmity with the Carrion Lord, or that in his own way he is not a reasonable man. Was he not our candidate for the Tower, once upon a time? The scheme might have faltered, but the underpinnings of it remain unchanged."

Which was a solid point, and a reason I'd been willing to consider taking on Scribe in the first place: what did I care if she'd betray me to Black, if I never got in conflict with him?

Eudokia wanted nothing to do with either the Dead King or Malicia, my two most prominent enemies, which was a major point in her favour. Unfortunately while I agreed with Akua that she was a very capable woman, that only made it worse that I also agreed with Hakram: we knew fuck all about what Scribe wanted, and with that in mind I was very wary of letting her loose into the Truce and Terms.

I wasn't worried about sabotage, if so she'd already be dead. But I was letting a fox into the henhouse, there were no two ways about it.

"Let's not pretend we can take her in and not use her," Indrani pointed out. "We take her, she's not going to be a messenger girl: it'd be dangerous to use her like that, spit on what her Name's worth. I don't think it's much, but it's definitely more than that."

"Her resources could be used in Mercantis to combat Malicia's influence," Akua said, speaking directly to me. "To hunt the Intercessor's agents, to help provide the Arsenal with exotic assets, and that is only the use of what she leads. As a Named, she can smooth essentially any task she is assigned to. Are we not ever drowning in disasters?"

Archer eyed her with surprise, as if she couldn't believe would care enough about this to speak this vehemently. I was a little surprised myself, to be honest. The Calamities had long been her enemies, and she had no reason to love Scribe,

"If she does become what was described as a threat," Akua continued, "That is, a banker and facilitator for villains, imagine how useful she would be as such a broker yet in your service! It would be *wasteful* to kill her, Catherine. Consider whether the Accords you envision, the Cardinal you would build, can really thrive if you are afraid of letting in talent."

That... was another good point, actually. The counter-argument came easy, that the Accords were years in the future while taking in Scribe was a risk in the present, but that last tirade should have weight on the scales. I'd heard from the other two, so my gaze moved on to Hakram. He'd already served as a goad for the other two, so he was due to actually speak his own mind.

"On purely practical grounds we should kill her," Adjutant calmly said. "Her death would leave a large segment of the Eyes leaderless and easy to pick off for the Circle of Thorns. She would undeniably be useful if properly employed, but that would involve giving her access to our inner workings while she's not been proved to be trustworthy."

I'd argue it was debatable how much access she really needed to be given, if she'd learned about some details of godsdamned

Quartered Seasons on her own, but otherwise his points stood. I cocked an eyebrow, as we both knew he wasn't done.

"No one here is a saint, Cat," Hakram said. "I won't pretend we're above slitting her throat and disposing of the body, or that showing kindness will make her one of us – she already has a home, a cause. But I hear us talk, sometimes, and wonder how often our words have been spoken."

He bared a hint of fangs, teeth like white knives.

"If Dread Empresses have not sat with their Chancellors and Knights, with their Warlocks, they too deciding that someone needed to die just so they could rest a little easier," Adjutant gravelled. "Did we fight all these years, Warlord, so that we could be just another spoke in the same old wheel?"

I'd been an idealist as a girl, hadn't I? In my own way. Gods, I hardly remembered what that felt like. Too many compromises since, too many ugly choices, and I knew deep down that following principle once would mean nothing. Change nothing. But I looked at Hakram of the Howling Wolves, crippled in his wheelchair because of an ugly choice I had made, and found I could not argue with him. Not for guilt, though that would stay with me until I died, but because he was a reminder of a simple truth: this had to be about more than just winning.

If it wasn't, it would all end as I stood victorious in the ruins of the world.

And so when Scribe stood before us, come Morning Bell, I tossed her a small painted iron pin, in the shape of a curled skeletal hand pointing a finger.

"Congratulations, Scribe," I said. "You are now officially a member of the adjunct secretariat."

Slowly she nodded.

"Good," I smiled. "Now report."

Chapter 51: Endwise

"And so Maledicta said: 'All the world had denied us, so let it all be damned and we with it. This wasteland of our own making, it will kill us or we will kill it.'"

– Extract from the Scroll of Misfortunes, thirteenth of the Secret Histories of Praes

Before the Conquest my people's maps of Praes had tended towards imprecision when it came to the interior of the Dread Empire, with only the western parts well-known to the Old Kingdom and the

details of the eastern coast usually being cribbed off of Ashuran maps. I'd never dealt with that difficulty, as even before my time in the War College had given me access to standard Legion maps I'd been given the luxury of using Black's own whenever I wished – though I'd not understood quite how much of a gift he was giving me, back then.

Only when Juniper and I had gotten around to raising the Army of Callow had I realized how troublesome it was to get any good maps that weren't in noble hands or Legion-made, much less sets as good as those Black had kept for Praes and Callow. Back in the day I'd suspected the cartographers that were an official part of the Legions – under the Kachera Tribune of any legion's general staff – weren't the only reason my father's charts were so exactly precise, and now I was getting confirmation.

The leather-bound scroll that Scribe unfolded across the table was no larger than a saddle length but I openly lusted for what I saw displayed on it: a map of the Dread Empire, showing not only cities towns and villages but also the roads and typical regional weather. The last of these had been the death of many an incursion into the Wasteland, given how centuries of reckless rituals had turned it into a deathtrap of sudden storms morphing into burning heat or freezing cold on a whim. Gods but I wanted a dozen of these.

"When we're done with this, we'll be talking about your upcoming contributions to my personal map collection," I noted.

She shot me a look, a face I glimpsed to be lightly tanned giving me the impression of disconcertment. Had those been brown eyes I saw? Already my recollection was fading.

"Sometimes you do remind me of him," she admitted. "Though nowhere as much as some people like to claim."

"We've all got some of our teachers in us," I shrugged. "And he's been more than just that to me. But I interrupted, my apologies. Continue."

She nodded, then idly set down painted iron blocks – regular Army of Callow issue for our general staffs, I noted with some chagrin – on two cities: one black and over Ater, one white and over Aksum.

"On the surface, the situation in the Dead Empire is a classical Praesi civil war," she said. "Being waged between empress-claimant Sepulchral and empress-regnant Malicia."

"You even us the proper terminology," Akua said, sounding surprised yet pleased.

I snorted. Yeah, I supposed considering how often someone raised a rebel flag in the Wasteland to take a swing at claiming the Tower the Praesi would have been forced to develop a very specific vocabulary to address the situation. Would have gotten real awkward in conversation otherwise.

"I have spent longer in Praes than the Free Cities, Sahelian," Scribe chided. "Few even remember I was not born of the Wasteland. Your preconceptions aside, I was setting out the factional lay of the land. Both empresses have, naturally, gathered supporters."

A single smaller white block went on the city of Nok, where High Lord Dakarai Sahel ruled. Nok was traditionally considered the weakest of the High Seats, as the Kebdanas of Thalassina had long been kings of the sea trade and dominated overland trade towards Ater even though Nok was physically closer. That said, with Thalassina now largely vapour High Lord Dakarai now sat atop the only major remaining Praesi seaport. His support was no small thing.

"Hardly a surprise," Akua said. "Dakarai has been looking for a way to get a foothold into a reigning coalition for decades. It is a matter of pride, for him, and pride matters much to the man. He made sure to oppose Mother in public frequently simply to make plain that the Sahel origins as a branch family of the Sahelians did not mean she held influence over him."

The man had never been a friend to Malicia, I recalled, or at least not been counted among her supporters. Considering the High Lord of Thalassina had been one of her most ardent partisans, there was little need for an explanation as to why.

"It is as tight an alliance as can be had in the Wasteland," Scribe informed us. "His daughter Hawulti is now wed to Sepulchral's appointed successor to the High Seat of Aksum, her grand-nephew Isoba."

Hawulti Sahel, I mused. I'd heard that name before, hadn't I? I glanced at Hakram in question.

"She was once one of Heiress' retinue, recalled to her father's side after First Liesse," he provided.

"You threatened to have her soul cut out by Lord Masego to coerce her father into supporting the establishment of the Ruling Council," Akua amusedly reminded me.

I had, hadn't I? It'd been a while. I could hardly recall her face, or that of her father's for that matter. I'd only spoken with the man the once. I'd also gotten a little more cavalier with souls in the following years, so the threat hadn't exactly stuck with me.

"Someone we should be worried about?" I asked.

"Ambitious but cowardly," Akua assessed. "A born follower. Her father sent her to me for hardening, as she is the only one of his children to be born with the Gift and he favours her for it."

That'd be a no, then. Probably why Sepulchral had been willing to twine their lines too, which Praesi high nobles were notoriously careful about: they hoarded the secrets of their blood most jealously.

"Malicia's support, as empress-regnant, is significantly stronger," Scribe continued.

Black blocks went down, one after another. Wolof, where Akua's cousin Sargon Sahelian ruled now that her mother was dead. Okoro under High Lord Jaheem Niri, which had been a political nonentity in Praes for most of my lifetime due to the brutal succession crisis that'd eventually put the man on the high seat. Kahtan under High Lady Takisha Muraqib, now the last High Seat in the hands of the Taghreb. The Northern Steppes, where Malicia had raised the chieftains of three southern clans to the office of Lords of the Steppes and charged them with keeping order and collecting tributes. And last of all Foramen, where the former Matron Wither now ruled as High Lady. Pickler's mother had backstabbed her fellow goblins brutally, and gotten an unprecedented title for it.

"She's also still got most of the Legions," I pointed out.

While maybe half of the former Legions-in-Exile had deserted in the wake of the dirty trick that'd brought them home, the forces that'd already been in Praes had stayed largely loyal and absorbed the soldiers that hadn't deserted. As far as military might went, even if you left noble allies out of it Malicia had a larger stick to wield. Sepulchral was relying on a kind of army Black had built the modern Legions of Terror to beat, too, which was one of the many reasons why she would be avoiding giving battle.

"And that's where it gets complicated, right?" Archer said, eyeing the map with mild interest.

Wasteland games were no real concern of hers, unless I made them to be otherwise, but Indrani did like an occasional spot of theatre and even at its worst the Dread Empire tended to deliver on that.

"Indeed," Scribe said. "The first illusion to discard before the situation in Praes can be understood is that there are only two sides in the civil war."

She set down a small red iron block on the edge of the Green Stretch, where thousands of deserters from the Legions-in-Exile had raised reportedly raised a great camp.

"Lord Amadeus' army?" Adjutant asked, dark eyes watching Scribe closely.

I watched them flick away more than once, no doubt prompted to do so by her aspect, but they always found her again. It was the obvious guess, now that I was learning more about the situation. Dread Empress Sepulchral's ability to outwit the Legions on the march, if not beat them, had led many – including me, once – to believe that my father might be behind her. The way this was being described though, made it seem much less likely. Black would have gone for the throat by now, not kept maneuvering in this empty stalemate.

"I'd presumed so as well," Scribe admitted. "But I have found no evidence of it. The leaders, General Mok and General Sacker, seem to have been acting without orders and out of a degree of genuine disgust for Malicia's actions with the control contingencies – though Sacker, at least, has sympathies in the Grey Eyries and rightfully fears being killed by Malicia or Sepulchral if she lays down arms."

It also meant that leadership of the deserters was nonhuman at the very top rung, I mused, since as I recalled General Mok was an ogre. No doubt that was making the two Soninke fighting for the right to rule over them more than a little wary.

"Lots of ogres in charge now," Indrani mused, narrowing in on the same detail. "Isn't the last Marshal one too?"

"Marshal Grem is under house arrest in Ater, not dead," Scribe corrected. "But you are correct that the commander of Malicia's armies, Marshal Nim, is an ogre as well. It is the most influential their kind has been in imperial affairs for centuries, if ever."

"But there's no black block over the Hall of Skulls," I said.

A grim name for the sole ogre city on Calernia but then they tended to be a grim people all around.

"The ogres are hedging their bets," Scribe frankly said. "As they always do. It is why no attempt was made to recall your own General Hune. It has historically been their policy as a people to have someone already lodged within every side so that they have a foot in the winning one, whichever it might be."

And I could see how that spared them crackdowns, I thought, but it'd not really *paid off* for them either had it? Required military service quotas under Malicia and Black had been lower

than under Nefarious but they'd still existed, and there'd been no major push to increase their status as a people within the Empire like there'd been with greenskins. Part of that was numbers, since there were so few of them compared to the constituent peoples of the Dread Empire, but those alone weren't good enough an explanation. Hune had always been bluntly frank with about her people being on no one's side because they saw no one as being on *their* side.

"I can understand the deserters making Malicia wary of overextending," I said. "Explains why there hasn't been a serious attempt to siege Aksum yet even though it falling would end Sepulchral. But she should be winning this pretty decisively with this many supporters to call on, Scribe, so what are we missing?"

"Her coalition is fragile," Akua murmured, "and at odds with itself."

Scribe nodded in her direction.

"Kahtan eyes High Lady Wither, now the last of the Taghreb bastions, and begs off committing soldiers to Malicia's war," she said. "High Lady Takisha ponders her blood ruling both Kahtan and Foramen, and supports Malicia only because Sepulchral has no better offer to make. Wither herself is mired in war with the Confederation, while a combination of mismanagement and hatred makes the humans under her rebellious. There have been riots."

Off the map went the blocks for Kahtan and Foramen.

"Okoro backs the empress-regnant, but her freshly-raised Lords of Steppes are pulling at the leash," Scribe continued. "The Niri must keep men out on the fields, lest the Blackspears take to raiding again. Their contributions are measured, mage cabals instead of battalions. And the Clans are pushing back against these lords they did not choose – Grem's old clan, the Howling Wolves, are at war with the Graven Bones and sending envoys to other clans to assemble a coalition. The Red Shields burned the holy grounds of the Stag-Crowned, and denounce them as traitors to orckind. The warbands that were sent to serve Malicia stayed, but there are no more forthcoming."

Only a single block was removed, the one in the Steppes. Okoro was committed, if not as much as Malicia probably wished it to be.

"And so Wolof remains," Akua quietly said. "She owns Sargon, then?"

"I believe she has soulboxed him," Scribe replied.

I'd never head of the term before, so I cocked an eyebrow at Akua.

"It is much like it sounds, dearest," she told me. "His soul was severed from his body by ritual and placed in an enchanted box. It is difficult to kill through this, but by sorcery atrocious pain can be inflicted. It is tradition, however, that the box be sealed for only so many years."

She turned her gaze to Scribe, her silence an unspoken question. Wolof had taken a beating when Sargon overthrew Tasia Sahelian, Akua's mother, and it'd been the Legions of Terror under Marshal Nim that ultimately re-established order there. With Malicia's soldiers in the city the freshly-risen High Lord Sargon would not have been in a great bargaining position, so I doubted the length of time would be small.

"At least ten years," Scribe said. "Perhaps as much as three decades."

Akua sighed.

"He'll try to steal it back," she said, "but with Mother's spies in disarray the Eyes will have gutted them. Sargon will not turn on the Tower so long as she has the box."

"Wolof is still handling demonic taint from its latest contested succession," Scribe said, "and so it has offered few troops, but those it sent are elites. They have been raiding the hinterlands of Aksum with great success, stealing people as much as wealth. High Lord Sargon intends to fill his city anew."

I drummed my fingers against the table, frowning. All right, so I could see how the stalemate had come into being. Sepulchral couldn't afford a field battle against the Legions of Terror, she'd lose and her cause would die. Yet since it stood between Askum and Nok, Ater had to be garrisoned with reliable soldiers – which meant legionaries, not household troops with ever-dubious loyalties. That'd peel soldiers off of Marshal Nim's army, enough she'd be careful about sieging the rebel High Seats and all the nastiness that implied. If she lost too many soldiers storming a city, she risked being caught by Sepulchral and smashed in a war that was frankly hers to lose.

And all the while the deserters were looking on, keeping everyone from taking hard risks lest they intervene and finish off the weakened victor.

The balance of the power was in the south, I thought as I stared at the map. Foramen and Kahtan, the forges and the armies. If High Lady Takisha could be convinced to call on her many vassals and make war for Malicia, Marshal Nim would have troops to throw into the breach when attacking a High Seat. But it was not something the High Lady of Kahtan would be eager to grant the Tower when instead she could try to cement the Muraqib legacy and

have her family rule the last two great cities of the south. Which led me to another question.

"How can Malicia afford to make trouble for us abroad, with all these fires in her backyard?" I frankly asked. "She should not have the time or gold to spare."

"Kahtan and Foramen still pay their taxes, fully and promptly," Scribe replied without batting an eye. "So do Okoro and Wolof, though their caravans are larger and armed. The Tower has undertaken no rebuilding of Thalassina, so Malicia's treasury is filled to the brim by taxes and decades of Callowan riches. What can she spend her wealth on, if not trouble for the Grand Alliance? There are no more mercenaries to buy, and the gold does her no good sitting in a vault."

Huh. That was one way of looking at it, I supposed. And from her perspective the Grand Alliance wouldn't stop being an enemy if it wasn't fought, it'd just have more allies and resources to spare when it finally turned its gaze on her after the war with the Dead King was done. But this did raise the veil on a situation that had largely been opaque to us so far, which was more than a little useful. If nothing else, it made it clear what the state of the opposition truly was. I shared a look of understanding with Hakram.

"Malicia's position is much weaker than it seems from the outside," Adjutant stated. "And though the military advantage is with her, so long as she cannot bring Sepulchral to battle it means nothing."

They could keep marching back and forth across the Wasteland for years and little would change. It was hard to tell whether a long stalemate would favour Sepulchral or Malicia, though I was inclined to believe it'd help neither so long as the High Lady of Kahtan kept sitting the fence. I suspected the bribes being offered to Takisha Muraqib were rising by the day, but with riots in Foramen making it clear Wither's grasp on the city was loose there would always be a greater temptation to the south.

"So where's the Carrion Lord?" Indrani bluntly asked. "It's all pretty stuff, this story, but it doesn't mean shit if he and the Lady aren't accounted for."

I glanced at her in surprise.

"You're not that flattering when speaking of him, usually," I noted.

She grimaced.

"If the Lady's stuck with him for two years, they're up to something that caught her interest," Archer said. "Her interest isn't easy to catch, Cat."

True enough, I thought. Though I'd been given to understand there was actual sentiment between them too, which was bound to weigh on the scales.

"The man does command a remarkable amount of loyalties within the Legions and the bureaucracy," Akua warily agreed. "It seems odd he has not called on them."

"I found him near Hospes, on the southern shores of the Wasaliti," Scribe said. "Without attendants or even companions save for Ranger. He was travelling south."

"And I'll believe that's all you know when it snows in Levante," I said. "Go on."

"Before Ime's purges began to seriously hamper my ability to gather information, I confirmed he's been in both Foramen and the Grey Eyries," Scribe said. "I cannot be certain as to why, however. There are also semi-reliable sightings of him much further north, to the west of Okoro."

Which meant close to the Steppes, where he was a lot more likely to find allies than at a High Lord's court. I made sense, but I wasn't buying it. Black had always been popular with greenskins, but stripped of command over his Legions it was almost *predictable* for him to try to raise fresh armies in the Steppes and the Eyries. My teacher was a lot of things, but predictable was rarely one of them.

"He will be using the Twilight Ways, if can move so quickly and discreetly in a war-torn land," Adjutant said.

I nodded in agreement after a moment, gauging the distances involved mentally. Yeah, there weren't a lot of other credible explanations for that. We'd been pretty sure that was how he'd left Salia, as he would have been caught riding through the Proceran countryside otherwise, but confirmation was always useful.

"As for why the two of them have been so discreet," Scribe continued, "I do have an answer. Or at least part of one."

She came forward to offer me a folded parchment, which I opened with impatience. To my surprise it was something I'd heard before: wild rumours from the Green Stretch about pale ghosts being glimpsed off the roads. A number had supposedly been put to them: ten. So it wasn't even Black and Ranger that'd been sighted. I passed the parchment to Hakram, who after a puzzled moment passed it to Akua. She looked equally bemused, and passed

it to Archer absent-mindedly. It was Indrani who went still after a casual glance, cursing in what I was pretty sure was High Tyrian.

"Ten. Fuck. You're *sure*?" Indrani asked Scribe.

"There have been several independent sightings," Eudokia confirmed.

"Anything you'd care to share?" I mildly asked.

"There's ten Emerald Swords," Archer said. "And when the Forever King gets in a mood and decides it's time to start trying to kill the Lady again, they're who he sends. He hasn't tried anything since the dwarves told him if his people stirred up shit near a dwarven gate they'd take it as an act of war – it's why people called us a protectorate of the Kingdom Under – but she's left Refuge behind now. It makes sense they'd go for her again now that she's low on allies and the Tower can't do much but complain even if the Swords are seen."

I hummed. That rang true, considering Hanno had just passed along a reminder from the Golden Bloom that they were going to take it very badly if we let Ranger into the Truce and Terms. They'd want the old thorn in their side as isolated as possible, not under the protection of treaties binding together half of Calernia. Considering the general uselessness and unpleasantness of the elves while we'd been waging a war for survival against Keter, I found myself in the surreal position of actually rooting for Ranger a little bit.

Gods but these were strange times.

"The Carrion Lord cannot formally seize command of an army, else the Emerald Swords would converge on it looking for the Ranger," Akua lightly said, sounding mightily amused. "Ah, the fickleness of fate."

I didn't particularly share her amusement, as if my father had seized the Tower we'd have the east settled instead of this fucking mess going on for forever and a half. He could have signed onto to the Terms and brought the Legions of Terror north instead of playing hide and seek in the Wasteland while trying to get something rather nebulously defined off the ground. Mind you he'd had her father killed as she watched, so I could forgive some manner enjoyment at his expense. Akua could claim Praesi mores as the source of her indifference there all she wanted, she'd actually loved the man who'd died.

No one got over that quite as neatly as she liked to pretend she had.

"Anything you would care to add?" Adjutant asked Scribe.

"Not at the moment," she replied.

For a moment I considered dismissing her until we were done discussing Praes, then I figured there would be little point: she'd learn what was decided in here sooner or later, anyway, and we might need to call her back in if we had questions.

"Take a seat," I ordered her.

I didn't bother to check if she did, already turning towards my councillors.

"So," I thinly smiled, "the Praesi situation. Thoughts on what our response should be?"

It was not a long debate that followed, or a particularly contentious one. It wasn't for lack of opinions, though. Archer's take on what our involvement should be east of the Wasaliti was essentially a shrug, with an added suggestion that the Tower should be made aware of the presence of the Emerald Swords – whether it'd harm the elves or Malicia she cared little, since she smiled on both outcomes. Akua and Hakram were both in favour of intervention, but in different ways and seeking different outcomes.

Adjutant suggested Callow begin providing arms to the Clans fighting Malicia's appointed lords in the Steppes, noting that my kingdom had much to gain from closer ties to a victorious orc uprising: it could serve as a point of pressure against whichever empress edged out the other, and broadly speaking favoured a faction that in turn favoured Black. Hakram agreed with me that my father in the Tower was our best outcome in the Wasteland, though he wasn't as inclined to see him as an ally. If we wanted the Dread Empire at peace with Callow and willing to fight north, though, there was no denying that Black was the best choice.

Akua favoured backing Sepulchral instead, though not enough to make her win. She argued that a bolder, better armed Dread Empress Sepulchral might be tempted to give battle to the Legions of Terror – and that ensuring no one won a decisive victory there was Callow's gain, since casualties and desertions would weaken both sides. She advised leaning on Cordelia and the Dominion to have Sepulchral recognized as ruler of Praes and attempting to broker an alliance between her and the rebel orc clans in the Steppes. Her approach was cheaper on our coffers than Hakram's, but it carried other risks.

Callow couldn't afford to get dragged into fighting out east right now, we just didn't have the men to spare. And adventurism in the Wasteland was brutally unpopular a notion back home, especially now that it'd come out that Malicia's deal with the Dead King supposedly ensured his undead would not attack us so

long as she lived. It was only after they'd all spoken that I turned to Scribe.

"Suggestions?" I mildly repeated.

She stayed silent a moment.

"It is my understanding that the Army of Callow is severely lacking goblin munitions?"

My brow rose.

"True," I admitted.

"Then I would suggest reaching out to High Lady Wither," Scribe said. "Who has a large stock of these she is not using, while she *could* use shipments of grain to quell the riots in Foramen. Rationing is one of the causes of unrest."

It also meant helping Pickler's mother, to some extent, while we were nominally allies with the Confederation of the Grey Eyries. Which she was at war with, after having betrayed them. Was I comfortable with that? Not really, but then I wasn't any more comfortable with my sappers having empty hands.

"Something to consider," I acknowledged. "Go on."

"Reach out to General Sacker," she said. "The defeats she inflicted Sepulchral are what made her desperate enough to rebel, and she is close with the same Matrons who rose against Malicia in addition to being an Amadeus loyalist. Neither empress will suffer her to live if the deserters disperse, which means she is very much in need of a patron."

My eyes narrowed. That camp was bound to be full of spies, both Eyes of the Empire and Sepulchral's own, but so long as I didn't actively support a rebellion against the Tower – which the fighting up in the Steppes was, effectively speaking – I doubted Malicia would make aggressive moves against Callow. She'd be throwing away the advantage she bought with making known the terms of her treaty with the Dead King if she did. It also opened the door to recruiting many of those soldiers if things went bad for them in the Wasteland, which they yet might.

Shit, I thought. Akua had been right, it really *would* have been a waste to kill the Scribe. A handful of sentences and she'd both given me a shot at steady my munition problem and figured out a palatable alternative to being a mere watcher to the mess unfolding in Praes. I turned to look at Hakram.

"Can Duchess Kegan be trusted to negotiate with Sacker?" I asked.

It was tacitly accepting Scribe's suggestion and did not pretend otherwise. The orc's face tightened a moment, but it went away

almost immediately. A spasm of pain? I'd thought his wounds under control. I'd talk to his healers tonight about the dosages in his potions.

"I am uncertain," he admitted. "She would see the use in it, but she is less than fond of both goblins and Praesi. I'd advise naming a negotiator ourselves instead and putting them under Kegan's nominal authority afterwards."

I nodded thoughtfully.

"Have five names for me by nightfall," I said. "And forward word to our contacts in the Grey Eyries: I want to broach the subject of buying up Wither's munitions to our friends the Matrons. Just sound them out for now, gauge how bad the fallout would be."

I doubted the Matrons would be all that offended by backroom dealings even with their sworn enemy – those were a proud goblin tradition – but I'd rather keep things above board so they wouldn't suspect I was softening on Malicia. Without Callow's support their situation looked much grimmer, and the Tribes had ended most their previous rebellions by cutting a deal with the Tower when things looked that way.

"Send reports to Vivienne about all of this, please," I added after a moment.

I would have liked her in the room for this, I thought with a pang of regret, but there'd been no anticipating that Scribe would suddenly come to us. And by the time word got to her, we'd be out on campaign so it would be exceedingly difficult to discuss affairs like this – outright impossible, when we got deep enough in the Dead King's territory and scrying was broken up.

"I'm sure those will make for a pleasant reading with her breakfast," Indrani drily said.

I suppressed a grimace. Without meaning to, Archer had reminded me I was slipping back into old habits – keeping Vivienne out of the loop, out of major decisions. I wasn't doing it for petty reasons this time, but I was doing it anyway.

"You're right," I told Indrani, who blinked in surprise, before turning to Hakram. "Arrange a scrying session with her tonight, I'll tell her in person. Tell her it's urgent, worth cancelling prior engagements for."

And we could discuss her suggestions, if she had any, before I handed her the reins on this. Someone was going to have to handle it while I was gone and it might as well be her. She'd be handling the fallout long after I'd abdicated.

"It'll be done," Adjutant said.

I nodded my thanks, eyes finally turning back to the still-seated Scribe.

"So let's talk maps," I smiled.

Adding another few to my growing collection would give me something to ponder about, when we began the march north.

Chapter 52: Sortie

"Swift wars are long in the making."

– Stygian Proverb

The army set out from Neustal on a warm, sunny morning.

I'd been up since before dawn, when our outriders had set out – the Osen and Volignac light horse – so I was well into my day when the columns got moving. The Dominion forces of Razin and Aquiline served as our vanguard, an 'honour' they'd asked for and few had cared to contest. Given how light on their feet Levant infantry could be, raiders at heart that they were, my main concern had been that they'd get too far ahead of the rest of the army. To ensure otherwise I'd put General Hune and her Second Army behind them, since the lordlings were likely to curb their enthusiasm if they were leaving her in the dust.

Behind the Second I put our Alamans forces, the veteran Volignac army and the fantassin companies Princess Beatrice had picked in my name. With the Firstborn under my Lord of Silent Steps behind them, they made up the 'centre' of our army on the march. At night I'd let the drow loose on my enemies, but during day marches they needed to be protected. While beyond the drowsiness around dawn the Firstborn weren't *harmed* by daylight, it really was a waste to have them fighting by day considering how much more effective they were by night.

Our rearguard would be the Third Army under General Abigail: if there was anyone likely to see an ambush coming a mile away and leave no stone unturned looking for it, it was my sole Callowan general.

The Proceran troops were still filing out of the front gate in a semblance of good order – it looked like Princess Beatrice had spread out her own infantry between fantassin companies, using the rhythmic pace-setting of her drummers in an attempt at setting a marching beat for all Alamans soldiery – under my watchful eye when Hakram came to see me. Not in the stronghold as I'd claimed one of the watchtowers overlooking the trenches, half a mile away from Neustal, as a temporary base while the army got moving. It was a good vantage, and I'd been killing time talking with Pickler when Adjutant arrived.

There was no real way for him to come up, considering the top of the watchtower was accessible only by ladder, so I wove myself a few solid tendrils of Night. I anchored them to the edge of the tower rampart and went over the edge, guiding them to gently lower me in a landing before the orc. The sight was common enough that my escort – knights of the Broken Bells – did not even visibly react. Night was a lot less eldritch a power to their eyes, these days. People could get used to anything if it happened regularly enough.

“Catherine,” Hakram greeted me. “Here are the last dispatches before we leave.”

He offered me a few parchments with his skeleton hand and I took them. I noticed the Apprentice wasn’t around, even though he’d ended up accepting her presence as a helper. He must have left her behind for the trip.

“Thanks,” I replied, folding them open one after another.

The first was ordinary diplomacy: well wishes from Hasenbach and the Highest Assembly in our offensive. The second slightly more important, word from the Iron Prince that the dead had begun testing his army with large-scale night raids as it went up the mining roads. So far his pickets had caught them in time, but Prince Klaus believed it likely that his preparedness for a battle was being measured. That was promising, considering we quite wanted the undead army holed up in Juvelun to come out and fight him.

The last might be the most important of the three, though it was by far the least ornate. Just two sentences scribbled in a familiar handwriting: *It went well, the work has begun. I am on my way.* I allowed myself a thin smile. Good, that was a load off my back. I passed the parchments back to Adjutant.

“We’ve sent word to Papenheim we’re on the move, right?” I suddenly asked.

“I handled it this morning, as soon as the first soldier walked out the gate,” he agreed.

Thank the Gods he’d handled that, it’d entirely slipped my mind. Looking at him I began to speak then closed abruptly closed my mouth. My conversation with Vivienne last night had been fruitful, including her finding a candidate for talks with General Sacker – the steward I’d left to rule Marchford in my name, who was both minor nobility and fluent in Mtethwa as well as familiar with goblins from the tribe settled in my holdings – and suggesting the Jacks begin infiltrating the deserters’ camp. The part that’d surprised me, though, was that she’d also been in favour of arms sales to the orc clans rebelling in the Steppes.

She'd even urged me to discuss the matter more in depth with Hakram instead of dismissing it as I had, something that'd weighed on my mind since. Vivienne might not have stated it outright, but there'd been more than politics behind that piece of advice. Was now really the time, though, just as our offensive was beginning? *If I don't make the time, I'll never have it*, I chided myself.

"Adjutant," I said. "When we discussed our options in the Wasteland, yesterday-"

"The decision was made," Hakram calmly cut in. "There is no need to revisit it."

"Maybe there is," I said. "Put in an hour for it tonight, in my schedule. Give me an idea what the monetary costs might be of selling or sending armaments."

His eyes narrowed.

"Vivienne is meddling," the orc gravelled.

It wasn't a question.

"She made a suggestion," I shrugged. "I found worth in it."

His face grew very hard to read for a moment.

"Pity is a poor basis for a queen's decisions," Adjutant stiffly said.

"That's not what this is," I sharply said.

"Have your reasons for choosing differently yesterday become any less true?" Adjutant said. "No. Nothing has changed, save that you spoke with Vivienne."

"I'm not saying I'll do it," I bit out, "I'm saying I might have dismissed the possibility too quickly, and I want to know more about what would be involved."

I was trying to stay calm, but it was like he was *trying* to put the worst interpretation possible to anything I tried. I'd had to deal with that from others, but coming from Hakram of all – I made myself breathe out. That was kind of the problem, wasn't it? I wasn't used to this from Hakram because he'd always made it easy for me. Having this conversation with someone else wouldn't have felt nearly as grating. I was not sure I liked what that said about either me or him. He studied me, face once again unreadable.

"I'll see to it," Adjutant said. "I have two subordinates in the adjunct secretariat capable of making the proposal skilfully. They can handle the matter."

The tone had gotten challenging by the end of the last sentence. The unspoken part was easy enough to parse: *if this is a legitimate interest, it won't matter I'm not the one doing the talking*. And if it wasn't a legitimate interest, then he wanted nothing to do with it. I forced myself to remain expressionless and nodded in agreement.

"Is there anything else?" Adjutant asked.

"No," I quietly replied. "You can go."

I shouldn't have listened to Vivienne, I thought. This path was a dead end. I couldn't use the authority of the queen to fix the troubles of the woman. I clenched my fingers as he wheeled away downslope, towards the two phalanges waiting to help him into the litter he used to get around where the chair wouldn't work. It was not a pleasant, realizing that I had no idea how to even begin to mend this. *If it can be mended at all*, a treacherous voice whispered in the back of my mind. No amount of gestures would grow his limbs back or change that he'd lost them in my service.

Forcing a calm expression back on my face – people were watching, people were *always* watching – I pulled on Night and went back up the watchtower. I still had a war to fight, and it cared nothing for my worries.

—

By Noon Bell we were all on the road and the first reports from the outriders were trickling back in.

I'd abandoned the watchtower as soon as the drow were out of Neustal, instead taking Zombie on a ride and joining the Second Army. Morale in the ranks was high, though considering the backbone of the Second had been with me since before the Tenth Crusade I'd expected as much. I traded jokes and wild boasts with soldiers as I rode at their side, a Taghreb sergeant startling a laugh out of me when he confessed he'd promised his wife a mansion in Keter after the war – his fellows jeered it was why he was still here, afraid to come home and face her displeasure at failing to deliver – but eventually moved to ride at General Hune's side.

The ogre was not one for small talk but I hardly minded. She wasn't Juniper or Aisha, I had no good old days to get misty over when it came to Hune Egelsdottir. In a way it was refreshing, the simple clarity of our relationship: queen and subordinate, nothing more or less. It was with her I entertained the first reports from the outriders. The Volignac horsemen had gone east and west, since as natives to these lands they knew the grounds better, while the Osenia had been sent straight ahead up

Julienne's Highway. The benefits of the road ensured the latter came back first even if they'd gone further out.

There were few dead ahead, they'd told me. Three different warbands of maybe a hundred skeletons had been glimpsed about two hours of riding ahead, but no larger force. A band of two hundred riders under a cousin of Lady Aquiline had decided to forge further ahead to see how far he could go before encountering resistance, though only after swearing once more to obey my orders against skirmishing: he'd turn back the moment fighting became inevitable. The Beastmaster had kept going with him, so I was likely to get a good look ahead out of the venture. The Volignac scouts returned later and with uneven timing, bearing equally uneven news.

To the west the lowlands seemed empty save for small undead warbands like the Osenar outriders had seen, though there'd been half a dozen instead there instead of a mere three. The Hainaut lowlands were full of small hills and dips, though, and the Dead King a patient foe: it was a favourite trick of his to hide small bands like these and then suddenly assemble them in a larger army to hit a weak point in our defences. This time, though, the threat seemed to be coming from the east. A Volignac captain reported seeing a force of two thousand undead, mostly skeletons and Binds with a few ghouls, wandering to our northeast.

"Most likely a force meant to ambush one of our patrols," General Hune rumbled, and I agreed.

In a way that was a good sign: the detachment wouldn't be out here if Neshamah knew we were coming, as with our numbers and equipment we could easily smash it with paltry casualties. The Dead King was not so wasteful as to throw away two thousand for no gain, profligate as he was with bodies. I asked the captain if the undead had seen his riders.

"I do not believe so," the mustachioed man replied, "but the Enemy is a cunning foe, Your Majesty. I cannot be certain."

I wanted the Dead King unaware of our march as long as possible, even though it'd been impossible to hide that we were gathering troops in Neustal. Part of the reason the army under the Iron Prince had begun to march a week before us was to draw the enemy's attention, after all. The trouble was that the Hidden Horror could see through the eyes of his undead, and the moment he got a look at the army marching up Julienne's Highway he was going to send his closest army to halt our advance at the natural pass called Lauzon's Hollow.

We wanted that to happen, as if that army wasn't drawn forward our surprise strike at the Cigelin Sisters behind it would likely fail, but we wanted it to happen as late as possible. We didn't know exactly what Neshamah had in reserve, so if he had too long

to prepare a response it wasn't impossible for him to fortify both Cigelin and the Hollow. That wouldn't necessarily make it impossible for us to win, but it would make that victory... costly, to say the least.

Fortunately we'd established Neshamah could only 'see' through one corpse at a time, as it required a focus of his attention. But the Arsenal – more specifically the Repentant Magister and Hunted Magician – had also proven there was a working seeded inside Binds and Revenants that allowed them to 'call' for the attention of their master if they believed it warranted. So the tightrope to walk now was how we could wipe out that force of two thousand undead to our northeast *without* prompting them to tattle to their master. If we sent too large a force they were sure to do so, and if our heavy hitters – Akua or myself – went out personally the result would be the same.

We couldn't just ignore it, though, since with Binds in command they were sure to scout in our direction sooner or later. A pack of zombies or bones could be counted to display staggering stupidity, but Binds could actually think. There was a reason it was standard Grand Alliance tactics to target them first if we could find them among the horde.

"If we wait after nightfall the drow can wipe them out cleanly," General Hune suggested.

"That's rolling the dice," I replied. "There's no guarantee they'll wait that long to move towards us, and half the day still lies ahead."

The undead did favour night fighting when they had the choice and Binds around to make it, since unlike humans the necromancy that allowed them to see was not particularly affected by the dark, but it was hardly a rule. So far the Dead King should not have been alerted to our advance, as riders on the distance were hardly anything new. The Grand Alliance fielded regular mounted forays into the territory he held. Yet there was always the change he'd notice that a *lot* of his warbands had seen quite a cumulatively large amount of outriders today. There was no way to tell if that was the case, though, so no real point in worrying about it.

"A Dominion raid, then?" Hune said.

Could work, I mused. The Osenia elites, the slayers, they were skilled at ambushes. And with one of Razin's kin having died in ambush recently, Keter might even buy this was just a vengeance raid if we added some of his warriors to the force sent out. It thinned our vanguard, though, which I didn't like even if the road ahead was supposedly bare. I had other tools to use, though.

"We've got raiders of our own," I replied. "Send for Special Tribune Robber, would you? And Sapper-General Pickler as well."

Robber's band of marauders was still a mere cohort of two hundred, though the audacity of his raids with them meant few of the goblins in it were the same as when he'd first been given the command. I wouldn't send him alone against two thousand undead, though, especially given that ghouls were just as quick on the feet as goblins and a lot meaner in a fight. It was time we gave Pickler's new copperstone ballistas a proper trial in the field – which Neshamah should buy as a reason for a raid north, if he ended up looking in – but to add a bit of muscle I'd throw in regulars backed by Levantines.

They'd get pissy about honour otherwise, so I might as well borrow a warband of two hundred Osenal slayers as well as an escort for the engines in the form of a cohort of regulars from the Army of Callow. That'd mean around nine hundred soldiers, which I was comfortable sending out considering they were drawn from several parts of my column instead of thinning out one in particular.

I spoke to my goblins first, Robber proving eager for the task and Pickler insisting on going along with her ballistas. I couldn't deny having her there would be useful when it came to assessing their performance, so I allowed it. Hune detached a cohort of regulars and briefed them herself while I went to the Levantines. Aquiline proved flattered that I would call on her elites in particular, which meant she was disinclined to argue when I requested her officers heed the instructions of the senior Army officer on the field – in theory Pickler, though in practice it'd be Robber. The forces were mustered within an hour, my Special Tribune running off ahead to pick his grounds.

Eventually the rest of the forces mobilized set out east after him and I stayed seated on Zombie, resisting the urge to ride her up in the sky and have a quick look. I had another ride with the ranks just to distract me with the urge. I missed fighting, I could admit it to myself. I'd learned to use other means, as violence had so rarely been enough to get me through the kind of messes I stumbled into, but there'd always been something viscerally satisfying about smashing your enemy personally. Instead I had to wait like a decorative lump as Noon Bell slowly crawled towards Afternoon Bell, receiving continuing outrider reports and waiting for news of the skirmish in the northeast.

Robber came back half an hour before Afternoon Bell, dusty but flushed with preening malice, and I knew it'd gone well before the little shit even opened his mouth.

"They fell for it, Boss, like Alamans told there's a wine cellar at the bottom of the well," my Special Tribune cackled.

It'd gone off without a hitch, he explained. His raiders had harassed the dead by snipping at their flanks with a few ambushes, then fled into their chosen killing grounds as the enemy ghouls pursued. The Osenia slayers hidden along the paths had scythed through the ghouls like wet parchment, then joined the flight with just enough of a delay that the commanding Binds were tempted into committing the entire force to pursuit. That brought them to flat grounds where Pickler's waiting ballistas pounded them to smoldering dust with their copperstone munitions. The regulars came forward to prevent the dead from leaving the flat grounds, hitting from the front while the slayers and goblins turned to hit the flanks.

It'd been a massacre.

Maybe two hundred skeletons led by the last Bind had fled but they were being pursued even now and bones were slower on the feet than even tired goblins. The entire affair had cost us fewer than forty casualties, making it a remarkably one-sided beating. When word spread through the ranks, I thought, it would raise morale significantly. There was nothing like an early win to make soldiers eager for further battles.

"I guess you get to eat with people instead of the horses this week, then," I mused. "Congratulations on the victory, Robber."

"I was going to what now?" the Special Tribune said, sounding alarmed.

"Don't worry about it," I winked. "I'm sure your right to eat anything other than oats is not at all contingent on bringing me more victories."

I winked again, just to piss him off, and ignored his increasingly loud attempts to question me over what he'd done to warrant this treatment. Verbally stepping on him put me in as good of a mood as the victory itself. It really was the little things in life, wasn't it? I didn't bother sending someone to ask Pickler for a report on the performance of the copperstones, as to be frank I'd be getting one whether I wanted to or not. The smile stayed with me until I got a visit from the Silver Huntress.

"There are dead on the horizon, Your Majesty," the Huntress said in that startlingly girlish voice of hers.

I cocked a brow. Like Indrani she had an aspect related to sight over long distances, but I'd kept the two of them close to the van to sniff out ambushes instead of sending them out too far. For the first day, at least, I considered that a better use. So how had she seen something no other Named – or myself – had?

"You saw them?" I asked.

"Word from Beastmaster," Alexis replied, shaking her head. "He sent a falcon."

"Ah," I hummed. "In that case, if you'd elaborate?"

She pointed a finger upwards. To the sky. *Shit*.

"Buzzards or vulture?" I asked.

The former weren't much of an issue, just large undead birds the Dead King liked to use as scouts. A 'vulture' was a necromantic construct, though, and though much smaller than a wyrm we'd seen a lot more of those on the Hainaut front. For their size – none was smaller than a house – they were damned quick, and hard to put down. Usually Keter used them to pick off patrols or strike behind our defensive lines, but on occasion they could serve as a sort of heavily armoured scout.

"One vulture," the Huntress said, "with a flock of buzzards around it. Headed straight towards us down Julianne's Highway, he says."

And there went my good mood. The Dead King *had* noticed something was up, then, and he wanted to confirm the nature of threat with eyes up in the sky. I closed my eyes and thought. Those couldn't be allowed to come too close, but at least the Huntress had warned us with time to spare. If we smashed the flock and vulture we'd still keep Keter from having direct eyes on us. Our overall campaign plan wasn't threatened, I thought. Even if the Hidden Horror knew my force was going up the highway, it wouldn't take away the strategic threat that was Prince Klaus' host taking Malmedit out east and collapsing the tunnels there.

Now that Neshamah had caught on to my own army's advance, though it was effectively impossible to beat his own force to Lauzon's Hollow. The force Keter had stationed between Cigelin and the Hollow was under a hundred thousand, we believed, but it was a mere three days' march between those two fortresses and the dead could walk through the night. It'd take them a day at most to move to one to the other from their current camp, hence why I'd wanted surprise on our side: even after today's march, our quickest possible pace on Creation would take us another six days getting to Lauzon's Hollow.

That was not truly a setback: that Keter would find my army had been a given, even if this was *much* quicker than I preferred. You couldn't walk seventy thousand people up a road and expect them to go unseen. By swatting the birds out of the sky we could still keep our numbers somewhat obscured, anyway. And strategically speaking my entire army was bait, in a sense, since the first blow in the offensive would actually come from our reserve sallying from the Twilight Ways and taking the Cigelin Sisters while my host drew the defensive army into Lauzon's Hollow.

Nothing had truly been lost, I knew, save that the Hidden Horror had more time to prepare his defences than I'd wanted to give him. So why did I feel so uneasy?

"Go find the Summoner," I finally said, opening my eyes. "And tell him I have need of his services: something that can fly and carry two people."

The Silver Huntress slowly nodded.

"Am I to go with him and destroy the dead?" she asked.

She seemed rather pleased at the thought of combat, if not the company.

"Not alone," I replied. "They'd see you coming from miles away and scatter."

She cocked her head to the side, waiting for me to continue speaking, and I was startled with how closely it resembled the way Archer did it.

"I'll be going as well, to weave an illusion that'll hide us," I said. "Archer will share my mount."

If the Dead King was going to learn something was headed his way no matter what, I grimly thought, I might as well give him something to *really* worry about.

—

All my affairs had been packed off for the road, so I had no tent to use.

I rode up to one of two wagons holding my affairs, though, and asked the phalange handling the reins to slow for a bit. I made my way inside, waking the magelight and going through my clothes. I no longer wore plate, these days, but I'd not forgotten my growing fragility: I dug out a plain steel breastplate and a helmet from a coffer. The helm was a nice bit of smithing, open-faced in the legionary manner but worked to have subtle golden inlays above my head evoking a crown. It'd also been forged to accommodate a ponytail, since I wasn't going to be fighting anyone with loose hair.

The wagon was shaky even at the reduced pace and armour was always tricky to put on alone, so I waited for Indrani join me — I'd sent for her before coming here — and instead grabbed something else from the coffer: a sword belt, with a sheathed blade on it. I slid the goblin steel out an inch, fingers tightening around the longsword's grip. Well-weighted, made especially for me. I'd refused a sword once, in Liesse-Become-Twilight, and I would not walk back that choice. But this was

war, and sometimes a staff and a prayer were not enough. I slid it back into the sheath and was tightening the belt around my hips when Indrani entered.

She cocked a brow at the sight.

"So it's a fight, then," Archer grinned.

"Help me put my armour on," I replied after hesitating a beat.

I'd almost not gotten the words out. It was not her, who usually helped me with this. Perhaps sensing she was treading tender grounds, Indrani was efficient about it. The breastplate settled comfortably over my torso, and after I tightened the clasps on my helmet she made sure the ponytail went out through the proper furrow at the back of my neck.

"War boots," Indrani reminded me after.

I'd still been debating that, as it happened. I'd never been a splendid rider and I was more comfortable in the saddle without steel on my boots, but then Zombie was not a difficult mount. Might as well. I sat on a trunk and reached into the pack by the side of it, only to freeze in surprised. There were my old campaign boots there, those I'd been dragging with me since I'd emerged from the Everdark, but also another pair. New, by the look of the leather, but pressing on them with my hands it was clear they'd been broken in. *Scribe*, I thought. It'd been idle talk when I'd mentioned the detail to her, but details were her trade.

"Cat?" Indrani asked.

They were just boots, I told myself. And still I took the old ones.

"Give me a moment," I replied. "As soon as we've got these on, we'll gather our war party and head out."

—

The Summoner was a backbiting, entitled prick but he did have a lot of combat utility.

Masego had been fascinated by his magic — said the man had, in a sense, failed so badly at both diabolism and fae-binding that he'd ended up making something entirely different from both — but also added it'd be effectively impossible for anyone but a dedicated apprentice to learn, so the man had stayed on the front instead of heading to the Arsenal. His 'summoning' was effectively shaping creatures out of magic that had limited sentience, with those summoned repeatedly gaining greater substance and intelligence as they 'hardened'.

It didn't sound like much, until you realized that given access to enough time and magic the man could make effectively any kind of creature he could think of. We'd later learned he had limits to the quantity of magic he could actually sink into a summoning, which did set a ceiling to the possible size of the summoned creature. His bigger ones tended to be highly unstable, too, so it was often better to aim below the ceiling and end up with something of better quality. Considering the man was whiny and grasping but not particularly violent, I might have ended up halfway fond of the Summoner if he'd not also kept insisting he was Callowan. What he *actually* was, though, was the son of a nobleman gone into exile and a Proceran lady. He'd never even set foot in Callow.

All his hinting that as a Callowan villain he should be my favourite achieved was increasingly strain my patience. Today, though, I had good reason to cut through the stupidity without coming across as overly high-handed. His summon, a wyvern-like creature without scales and imbued of a ghostly glow, was eerily. Not one he'd used often, then. I cast a curious look at it, then at the villain who'd crafted it and the Silver Huntress by his side. I reined in Zombie by their side, Archer in the saddle behind me. She waved at the Silver Huntress, whose face tightened in reply, and I elbowed her sharply.

It didn't do shit through her mail, but the message was received anyway,

"Your Majesty," the Summoner smiled. "I am pleased that you found use in my-"

"There will be time for courtesies later, Summoner," I said. "The enemy is on the move, and we do not have the time to spare. I need you and Lady Alexis on the back of your creation, and close to me: I will weave an illusion with Night that will obscure our approach."

Indrani snickered behind me, not all that subtly, but the look on my face clearly did not brook argument. They climbed the creature, the Summoner nestling close to the neck and the Silver Huntress further back. Zombie eyed the other mount involved with disdain, horrible little snob that she was. I spurred her to get closer and she obeyed even as I began to pull heavily on the Night.

"I have tread black stone and halls grown cold, freed of restraint by the blessing of my patron," I murmured in Crepuscular, weaving the Night around us, "Though feeble, I have devoured might. Though listless, I have stolen the wind. I call on you, Andronike, to veil eyes and ears so that I might triumph in your name."

The Night pulsed with approval, and I felt a breath around the back of my neck as the eldest of the Sisters leant her touch to the blessing. The air in a wide sphere around us, at least forty feet in diameter, grew hazy and smoky. The Summoner let out a little gasp.

"Stay close and don't leave the sphere," I ordered. "It won't last forever, so let's get moving."

Zombie's wings opened with a flourish, the wyvern-thing hastily imitating her, and with a gallop she began our rise upwards into the afternoon sky.

Chapter 53: Joust

"War, that most glorious of horrors."

-Bastien de Hauteville, Proceran general

Keeping pace turned out to be pretty tricky.

Zombie's wings weren't actually what allowed her to fly, since they were nowhere strong enough to actually lift a horse her size – much less with two riders on her back – but Masego had never actually been able to give me a clear answer about what exactly *did* allow her to fly. There'd been a lot of talk about natural domains and the inherent structural differences of the fae, but the bottom line was that he couldn't really explain it. There was at least *some* grounding in Creational laws, though, since Zombie did use the wings to steer around and adjust her flight. It made her flight pleasing to the eye, an extraordinary thing but not unnatural to behold.

The Summoner's creature was his own work, on the other hand, and not a being stolen from Arcadia. It was his own craftsmanship on display and it hardly equal to even a lesser god's, to say nothing of Above and Below. His wyvern-thing's wings moved, but the advance of the creature itself was jerky and only tangentially related to the way they batted. If anything the sight brought to mind the way I'd used to shape footholds out of ice in fights, if said footholds had then been forcefully dragged forward by magic. The flight was largely stable, though, and the Silver Huntress had a lot more room to stand at the back than Archer did on my own mount.

I suspected frequent use of this construct would make it more 'natural', as if the repeating conflict between magic made flesh and Creation was grinding the shape down into a compromise appeasing both.

For now, though, my main concern was ensuing that when the wyvern-thing pulled forward it did not take the other two Named

out of my Night-working. If they left the illusion, our enemy was likely to scatter into every direction: it'd be impossible to stop them from flying over the column then, we just didn't have the flyers for it. The sun was eating away at the illusion, slowly but surely, but I'd woven it with the personal blessing and attention of the eldest of the Sisters: it'd hold until I no longer needed it. Which promised to be soon, as the enemy's shapes grew from blots on the horizon to discernable silhouettes.

Leaning forward against Zombie's mane as Indrani's arm around my belly loosened to let me, I began to count to the smaller undead birds. The buzzards had been raised from the remains of birds, it was visibly true with each, but they'd not all been of the same size and so Keteran necromancers had expanded the frames of those who'd been too small. Made of bare bone and 'feathers' of dead wood framed with dulled copper, they were quicker and tougher than the actual dead birds the Dead King occasionally threw at us in flocks. I found thirteen, taking my time to find them all. None strayed far from the fat construct between them, the *vulture*.

At least a dozen feet tall, all bristling bones and thick folds of dead animal skin, the abomination watched the world with too-large wet red eyes: old blood long gone sour, made into something farsighted by ugly rituals. Its large and leathery wings beat the air, not quite hiding the rows of insect-like segmented legs under it. Each ended in a long spike of steel, which the construct could strike forcefully enough with to punch through plate – I'd seen it run straight through a knight, once, and toss her away like a ragdoll as the horse panicked. It was the 'bald' patch atop the head, where plaques of iron had been nailed into the skull to protect it from easy shattering, that'd earned the creature the sobriquet of 'vulture'. It was no wyrm, capable of tearing through an entire battalion in moments when catching it unawares, but vultures were no laughing matter.

"Thirteen buzzards," I called out. "Think you can handle that much?"

"Please," Indrani snorted into my ear. "It could be twice as many and it'd make no difference. Should I put an unraveller in the vulture just to make a point?"

"We're keeping them a surprise still," I declined.

A sharp whistle – it would not leave the sphere of my Night-working and give us away, the miracle was a very cleverly made one – drew my attention. The Silver Huntress wanted to speak, it seemed, and so I pulled at the reins to bring Zombie closer to the Summoner's creature. The wind would make it hard to understand the heroine, otherwise.

"There's something hidden on the vulture's back," the Huntress called out. "A refraction trick, I've seen it used by the dead before."

I did not ask her how she'd picked the detail out at such a distance, since it was exceedingly rude to ask another Named about their aspects.

"Does it work up close?" I called back.

"Yes," she shouted. "Needs disruption. Light works."

I frowned. There weren't a lot of things the Dead Kings would bother to hide on the back of something as visible as a vulture. Either he'd sent out mage Binds, which he was always careful about protecting, or there was a Revenant riding that thing. The first we could handle easily, the second might get... complicated. Some Revenants were no more dangerous than a necromantic construct, simple champions to use against Named, but there were some who'd kept the better part of their fangs even in death.

"Archer will handle the buzzards," I yelled. "Disperse the trick on my word, we'll attack together."

Zombie knew Indrani well and even liked her – she kept offering her oats that the godsdamned dead fae horse *did not need* – so there shouldn't be an issue leaving her on my mount's back. The Silver Huntress gestured to make it clear she'd heard, then retreated further on the wyvern-thing's back. Like Archer she'd come with her bow already strung and a quiver of arrows that were more or less the size of javelins. Unlike Indrani, though, she preferred a short spear to a pair of longknives. It was just as silver at the bow, and no doubt just as heavily enchanted.

I waited until we'd gotten within a hundred feet of the enemy. By then I could almost make out the trick the Huntress had mentioned: there was a... glimmer on the back of the vulture, whenever it shifted one side or the other. I leaned back towards Indrani.

"You ready?" I asked.

"Give me a moment," she said, pressing a kiss into the side of my neck for good luck.

She put a hand on my shoulder to help herself upright, standing on the saddle with a gleeful grin and nocking an arrow. Gods, I hoped she wasn't about to die a very stupid death just so she could have a better field of vision when shooting. She tapped my shoulder to tell me she was finished, and I turned to find the watchful eyes of the Silver Huntress.

"Now," I shouted.

She nocked an arrow of her own and smoothly drew, silvery Light gathering at the point like a blinding star, then casually released. My working shivered under the cold burn of her power, hollowing from the inside even as the sun attacked it from the outside, and shattered entirely even as the arrow left the confines of my illusion. In the heartbeat that followed, things happened so quickly I almost couldn't parse them – the buzzards began to scatter, Indrani loosed an arrow, the vulture tried to evade to the side and the silver arrow struck true. Two silhouettes were revealed, and neither looked like a Bind. *Fuck.*

I cursed in every tongue I knew. Time for a brawl, then.

I breathed out to steady myself, then threw myself to the side. Swallowing the scream that was trying to fight its way out, I forced my eyes to stay open and gauged the distances even as I drew on Night. *One, two, three, four and... there.* The gate into Twilight opened below me even as a second silvery arrow swatted a leaping Revenant back onto the vulture and a fourth buzzard dropped. I dropped through the warmer sky of the Twilight Ways for a heartbeat before pulling at the Night and wrenching open another gate, resuming my fall about two feet above and three feet in front of the vulture.

That repositioning trick had been a *bitch* to learn even with Komena helping me.

I dropped down, eyes wide open and cloak trailing behind me, and before I'd even landed atop the construct my enemies gave answer. A blackened longsword's point came at me in a thrust, exquisitely timed to go straight through my unprotected throat even as my feet touched the ground: I slammed my dead wood staff against the ground first, and the clap of Night that rippled out messed with the timing. Before the armoured Revenant – in impeccable knight's armour, I glimpsed, down to the faded heraldic swans of House Caen on the shield – could properly turn the thrust into a cut I landed in a crouch at its feet, fingers sliding down the length of my staff.

"Afternoon, Neshamah," I drawled, and rolled forward before the Revenant could bash in my head with its shield.

Right behind the first enemy the second had been waiting for me. Tattered robes and a breastplate of dull green light were all I caught before the points of the trident coming for my chest got a lot more pressing a consideration. Laughing I leaned back, earning myself half a moment – just long enough to unsheathe my own sword and slam the side of it into the blow. The dead Named pushed the lock one way and me the other, only my grunt breaking the silence. The Revenant was stronger than me, pale dead eyes staring down through a ratty hood, but Night pulsed through me and with a savage grin I slapped aside the blow – just in time to

see the Dead Knight about to run me through the back most unchivalrously.

Silver light rammed into the side of its head, blowing off half the steel helm and revealing blond locks on a beautiful face.

Dead Knightess, I mentally amended, and deftly twirled my staff to smash it into the exposed flesh. Too slow, I cursed, her shield coming up and even the Night I'd slid down the staff splashing out harmlessly against it. I narrowly parried a thrust from the trident and withdrew to the side prudently – that light breastplate wasn't that of a warrior-Named by my reckoning – but not *quite* swiftly enough. When lightning streaked down the trident's length and lashed out at me, it caught the edge of my cloak. The Mantle frizzled the magic, but did not shatter the spell: it twisted around, answering the Revenant's will, and struck my sword-hand.

I bit down on my scream, limbs convulsing, and dropped my sword against my will.

A blow from the back hammered into my shoulder, cutting deep as the Knightess put the full weight of her strength into it. Blood spurted and I was driven to my knees, but I let out a bark of laughter through the sting: painful as that had been, it'd broken the lightning spell's hold on me. The hand freed by dropping my sword went up as I drank deep of the Night, then closed my fist. As if a dragon had breathed in the air was sucked in by the funnel I'd crafted, drawing both Revenants in, and with a hard grin I spun my staff: blackflame roared out in a wheel. Both retreated, Robes doing better than Knightess whose exposed face was caught, but their relief was short-lived.

With a furious cry, the Silver Huntress entered the fray by smashing a shining spear into the Knightess' side. Pulling at my breastplate so it'd stop digging into my wound, I rose and offered Robes a wink.

"Hey," I said, "do you want to see a magic trick?"

The Revenant stiffened for a moment. Wait, was this one of the perfectly conscious ones? They were exceedingly rare.

"No," the Dead King replied through another mouth.

In the same moment, uncaring that there were also Revenants atop it, the vulture flipped upside down. Gods, Neshamah really was such an ass even when you discounted all the horror and mass murder. The Huntress still blew part the Knightess' shield in a streak of silver, scoring deep burns into the plate behind it, but I had to trade taking a shot at Robes for crafting a tendril of Night and catching the heroine by the waist, throwing her upwards. That cost me, as Neshamah-in-Robes got off a spell

before I finished crafting a veil of Night for my own defence: there was a boom of thunder that struck me like a physical blow, rattling my bones, and then my vision went white as a column of lightning erupted.

Would have caught me for sure, if a creature looking like a large ghostly pufferfish hadn't suddenly formed right in the path of the spell.

Shit, I thought, changing the veil from a defensive one form one that'd obscure my presence before I was done changing it. *I might actually have to be polite to the Summoner for that.* From the corner of my eye I caught one, two, three silver streaks – the Huntress had somehow taken her bow even while being thrown upwards and her arrows hammered into the Knightess mercilessly. Neshamah-in-Robes did not bat an eyes, beginning to weave a large web of lightning streaks around the lot of us – like a large, loose net. Clicking my tongue against the roof of my mouth disapprovingly, I opened a small gate into Twilight near the edge of the net and allowed it to close.

The Dead King, visibly irritated through his puppet's face, gathered the lightning streaks into a spear of spinning threads and tossed it at the Silver Huntress. I let myself keep falling, Mantle of Woe flapping around me, and pulled on the Night. I grinned as a silver arrow tore through the point of the lightning spear, hollowing out the centre, though it was an unpleasant surprise to find that the outer layers had kept shooting forward. I saw movement from the corner of my eye again, though, and kept working on my miracle with a pleased smile. Zombie glided down past the Huntress gracefully, Indrani catching her old comrade by the scruff of a neck.

They went into a dive before the spell could catch them, though the Dead King was already preparing another spell – lightning was pulsing around him, erupting from the frame of the Revenant in spikes. And still I waited, carefully shaping the Night.

The vulture swung around, one of those deadly legs catching the Knightess and slamming her onto its back before moving so that the Dead King's puppet could lightly land on the back. Just before the feet of Neshamah-in-Robes could touch the vulture they threw their spell – a ball of lightning that began to expand massively the moment it left his hands – I struck at last. Thin tendrils of Night shot out of me by the hundreds, ripping through my veil and revealing my position, but even as the Dead King turned towards me the first tendrils sunk into the flesh of the Revenant he was using. He began to cut at them with the trident, but there were too many and he was too slow.

"Here it is anyway," I smiled, and snapped my fingers.

Robes' silhouette shivered for a moment, then grew sunken as I hollowed it out from the inside with acid. Without bones and runes to anchor the necromancy, the Revenant collapsed within moments and there was simply nothing the Dead King could do about it. Which was good but I was still, unfortunately, rapidly hurting towards my death. That, uh, hadn't stopped while I was scheming. Fortunately others had noticed, and within moments the Summoner had brought around his wyvern-thing and even guided it to sweep me so I wouldn't break my legs landing on it. I gave him a thankful nod, then breathed out and opened a gate into Twilight in front of me.

A heartbeat later I stepped out of another gate onto the back of the vulture even as the Knightess turned to face me, longsword raised. She was a better swordswoman than me, I figured, and at the moment I didn't even have a sword. The Revenant reached behind her back, beneath a faded cloak, and to my surprise unsheathed another longsword. But instead of approaching me with both blades, she threw the fresh blade at my feet.

"A knight even in death, is it?" I mused out loud.

I was offered a salute, flat of the blade against her forehead, and nodded in return. I bent down to pick up the blade, shoulder wound stinging and already pulling on Night, but the expected betrayal never came. I was tempted, for a moment, to just blast her anyway. She might have been Callowan, once upon a time, but now whatever she might believe she was only a tool of the Dead King. And yet, as blood seeped down onto my breastplate and I watched this fair-haired killer standing across from me, I realized with a start that I wanted to beat her with a blade in hand. Wanted to give her that bit of dignity before oblivion took her, if I could. I spun the longsword, once and slowly, and though the weight was a little off it was no great hindrance.

"Catherine Foundling," I introduced myself. "Queen of Callow."

The pale dead face twisted into a smile.

"Aubrey Caen," she rasped. "Knight Errant, once."

I left my staff of yew standing, knowing it would not fall, and took a limping step forward. The air was crisp, this far up, and the afternoon's fading light cast us in relief as the wind howled around us. She took a step of her own, grip two-handed and pommel held above her head as she approached. I kept my guard low, knowing I'd not be faster than her to the strike – my kill lay in avoiding her blow and striking while she was extended. And beyond the cold bite of the wind, beyond the howl, I felt a warm breath against the back of my neck. A large thing looming behind me, fangs bared and eyes patient.

I smiled. *Approve, do you?*

The woman who'd once been the Knight Errant darted forward and struck with blinding quickness. I pivoted to the side, the same way another Knight had once taught me, and let the blow pass me – but one of her hands left the sword and she elbowed me with a steel-clad elbow. Or would have, if I'd not pressed the flat of my blade against the blow and pushed her back. She almost stumbled but turned it into a lateral swing. It found a parry waiting as I turned her blade and ripped it off her grasp. She was Named, even if dead, so she snatched it out of the air: but not before I slashed at her exposed face, drawing a deep bloodless cut across it.

I watched her, eyes unblinking, and felt something well up in me. Not Night, not power that was borrowed. It was all me, something born of Catherine Foundling and nothing else. My limbs felt limber, my hands steady, and when the Revenant struck again I knew she'd move before she did. The overhead cut was slapped aside, falling harmlessly beyond my shoulder, even as I struck her chin with the pommel and then, as she rocked back from the strength of the hit, measured my killing stroke through the neck. Or would have, had she not gone eerily still.

"I am not so helpful," Neshamah said, "as to provide you a whetstone for your Name."

The woman who had once been the Knight Errant sagged as he released her, falling to her knees, and her dead flesh began turning to flakes within her armour. She looked up, eyes almost pleading, and I breathed out.

Teeth gritted, I decapitated the Revenant.

Her head rolled and the Beast laid its head on my shoulder, its warmth approving. It was not a knight I was becoming, I thought. My old friend had not come out for the fight, but for what it stood for: me, standing in judgement over others. Delivering it sword in hand. And it had earned weight, that the Knight Errant had once been Named. I sighed, letting the wind ruffle my hair. To my left, I found Indrani seated on Zombie's back and gesturing to catch my attention. She'd transferred the Huntress back onto the wyvern-thing, it looked like. I curtly signalled for her to ride towards the back of the vulture, then limped in that direction and snatched up my waiting staff. The construct began to spin, in attempt to throw me off, but it was too late.

Absent-mindedly I pulled at Night, weaving a gate into Twilight right in front of the construct as it sped forward, and leapt off its back.

Zombie caught me, Archer shuffling backwards to make room, and after some difficulty I sat the saddle. The longsword the dead woman had given me was not an exact fit for my scabbard, but it fit. It would have to suffice. A heartbeat later the vulture's

momentum forced it to try to pass through the gate, where it suffered instead the Grey Pilgrim's burning hatred for the Dead King and all his works. Quite literally, as furious white flames devoured the necromantic construct until nothing was left but a handful of ashes scattering in the wind. I flicked my wrist, closing the gate shut, and finally allowed myself to feel pain and exhaustion.

"And now?" Archer asked.

"Now we head back," I replied. "And tell the army it's time to pick up the pace."

The Enemy knew we were coming, so the race against time had begun.

—

I clenched my jaw so I would not hiss as Senior Mage Jendayi healed the wound on my shoulder. I could have asked one of our priests to handle it instead and it would have been painless, but being healed with Light tended to screw with my ability to handle Night afterwards. Not majorly, but enough that precision work became difficult. Better to let one of my mages handle it, even if it stung as the flesh knit itself back together. Still, if nothing else the pain kept my mind focused on the here and now.

"Thank you, Senior Mage," I said, nodding my gratitude. "It was smoothly done."

Not compared to what Masego would have done, of course, but I'd been made clear to me over the years that this was a completely absurd standard to hold people to. The dark-skinned woman smiled and left the tent after requesting a check-up later tonight, leaving me to combat report turned war council unfolding around me.

"- the Black Queen personally slew the last in an honour duel, blade against blade," the Silver Huntress said.

She shot me an admiring look at that, and to my amusement so did Tazin and Aquiline. I became a little less amused when I considered how that little detail might have done months of work in trying to wean them of that practice.

"A whetstone for my Name," I dismissed. "Which slowly becomes clearer in shape."

And Gods Below, how large would the scope of it be for it to take so long to coalesce?

"Regardless," I continued, "the Dead King rode both Revenants at different times. There can be no denying that he is now aware of the existence of our column."

Even our most conservative estimates had been that we'd get two days before he caught on, so that wasn't a pleasant surprise. All those forward patrols we'd sent to sweep the lowlands in the last few months had failed to pay off, mostly out of what I'd consider bad luck. That force of two thousand that Robber and the rest had wiped out had clearly not been sent as scouts, after all. They'd not been the right make up of dead for that at all.

"Your presence will have told him this is a serious thrust," General Hune said. "Though we've kept our numbers unclear through your actions, so he won't be sure where our troops have been sent."

By which she meant he wouldn't be sure if our force, the visible one, was a distraction while another one stalked the Twilight Ways. Which was the case, but our numbers – seventy thousand men – were meant in part to dissuade him of that. Our reserve was less than half of my column, after all, and about that for the Iron Prince's army. When he got a good look at both our armies, which I intended to make him bleed to get, his conclusion should be that the numbers in the offensive meant we'd bet it all on two quick thrusts backed by Named.

"Agreed," Princess Beatrice said. "Though I'd recommend we make haste towards Lauzon's Hollow regardless. It is crucial we dictate the tempo if our surprise attack on *les Soeurs Cigelin* is to bear fruit."

I frowned. I was wary of hurrying forward heedlessly, as it happened. If the siege of the capital of Hainaut, our ultimate objective for this part of the campaign, was to be a success then we needed our supply lines clear up Julianne's Highway. Getting sloppy about clearing the lowlands as we advanced towards the Hollow was a good way to get sprung a nasty surprise when warbands of undead lying low united, though.

"With all due respect, ma'am, the reason we're not using the Ways to attack in the first place is that we need the highway clear for our supply lines," General Abigail quietly said. "There's no point getting to the capital if we starve while sieging it because the bread gets burned on the way."

I hid a smile. She was growing into the rank better, I decided, without my looking over her shoulder. Akua had been right about that.

"Then we split our forces," Lady Aquiline suggested. "Send out large warbands to clear the countryside of the enemy while the main column continues its advance."

"Split our forces while already outnumbered?" General Hune said. "A recipe of the enemy to roll us over piece by piece."

"We are outnumbered in principle, not in..." Ivah began then stopped, biting its lips. "These are not the correct words."

It turned to me, speaking a few sentences in Crepuscular. I nodded.

"The Lord of Silent Steps means we are outnumbered in a strategic sense, not a tactical one," I clarified. "I tend to agree. With the Twilight Ways we're quicker on the move than the dead, so we'd be able to afford sending out detachments to clear the countryside and still be assured we can concentrate the column before giving battle with the central enemy force."

At this point there was no denying that the enemy would move into the Hollow long before we were in a position to contest it. I'd be surprised if those one hundred thousand dead weren't already on the march as we spoke.

"If the Enemy fights as we want him to, and sends his soldiers to the man the Hollow," Captain Reinald pointed out. "This assessment depends on the Hidden Horror holding up in his defences instead of taking the field."

The two fantassin captains had been quiet in this council, aware that out on march their influence was not the same as in camp. Not even the snippiest of mercenaries would seriously threaten to walk in the middle of an offensive into the territory held by the Dead King. It'd be a death warrant for them, if nothing else.

"He's right," the Silver Huntress said. "We haven't gotten eyes on the enemy yet, Your Majesty. I'd like your permission to take a band out for a deep reconnaissance."

I mulled over that a moment. By a band she meant a band of five, so that was more or less a third of the Named with this army that'd be risked on this jaunt. Mind you, having actual hard information about where the enemy army was would be damned useful and sending heroes into an adventure of this sort a lot less dangerous in practice than it sounded. I eventually nodded.

"You'll take the Headhunter with you," I said. "Any preferences for the rest?"

"The Vagrant Spear," she immediately said, "and the Silent Guardian."

She paused for a moment, deep in thought.

"And the Rogue Sorcerer, if you have no other use for him?" she tentatively asked.

"Take him," I agreed. "In and out, Huntress. Don't let yourself be drawn into a scrap."

"As you say, Black Queen," she smiled, offering a quick bow.

She offered another one to the room at large, and departed with haste. My gaze returned to the rest of the war council.

"You've convinced me with the war parties, Lady Aquiline," I said. "I'll detach ten thousand drow under Lord Ivah to sweep the lowlands, as well as a fighting escort that can handle the daytime."

It couldn't be the Levantines, I decided. They were good at light warfare, I wouldn't pretend otherwise, but they were also a lot more likely to let themselves be drawn into unnecessary battles than a more discipline force. I wanted them close so I could keep an eye on them.

"I would volunteer for such a task if you'll allow it, Your Majesty," Captain-General Catalina spoke up. "My company can discharge these duties skillfully."

I glanced at Princess Beatrice, who subtly nodded. Good, she agreed this seemed like a decent idea then.

"Take your pick of the companies, no more than eight thousand total," I said. "You will be sharing command with Lord Ivah, I'll leave the details of the sweep to you."

"By your command, Your Majesty," the fantassin replied.

"Chno Sve Noc," Ivah simply said, inclining its head.

I rolled my shoulder, finding it stretched taut from the healing but no longer painful. Good work by Jendayi, that.

"As for the rest of us, we'll continue our advance at the quickest sustainable pace," I said. "Let's get to it, people – the Enemy won't dawdle, so neither should we."

Chapter 54: King's Fianchetto

"That there is little reason to war should be no surprise, for war is never the choice of reasonable men."

– Basileus Stavros Trakas of Nicae

It wouldn't be cheap.

The pair from the adjunct secretariat had been dismissed, leaving me with a pile of papers where the words 'maybe' and 'should'

came up uncomfortably often. While the phalanges who'd spoken to me – an orc and a Callowan, nice touch that – had been well-versed in the details, looking at the plans I recognized the careful method that lay behind them. This was Hakram's proposal, and not one he'd begun working on recently. Too much groundwork had been laid, and some of those numbers would have taken months to get. I was honestly astonished he'd managed to get his hands on estimated fighting strength for the greatest of the Clans, as the Jacks were completely blind in the Steppes.

As far as proposals meant it was well-crafted, and made it clear that not only was propping up an orc state in the Steppes achievable but it would benefit Callow in several practical ways. Establishing treaties with orc leadership and trading ties with western clans would ensure that raiding of my kingdom did not resume down the line, while a mutual defence pact would mean that if the Dread Empire turned on us both Wolof and Okoro would be knocked out of the war before the first sword was drawn. The Clans weren't rich in much besides amber and fur, but trading those goods south in Mercantis would mean steep profits for Callowan traders given the demand for both.

There'd be no need for actual Callowan military involvement either, as simply arming the Red Shields and the Howling Wolves up to Army of Callow standards would allow them to sweep through Malicia's allies in the Clans and become a thorn in the Tower's side in northern Praes. From there different manners of support could be offered, grain and cattle and craft goods, while the Clans stabilized as an independent polity and pressured the Wasteland with their raiders.

But there were... issues. For one, orcs didn't have a great record when it came to keeping to treaties – especially treaties binding multiple clans, considering the independent bent of their chiefs. The trade outlined would become profitable in the long term, yes, but in the short one it was a drain on the already strained treasury of Callow. It'd also represent an escalation of our current manner of war with the Tower, struggles abroad through intermediaries, to something significantly more aggressive. There was a difference between backing rival parts of the League and arming rebels in Malicia's backyard. This *would* prompt retaliation, one that Callow was currently ill-equipped to handle.

And the truth was that, in the end, I couldn't be sure the orcs even would stay an independent nation for long. If Black claimed the Tower then given his popularity up north he shouldn't find it overly difficult to bring the Clans back into the fold. Meaning I would have pissed away gold, political capital – it was going to be a difficult sell in Laure to arm greenskins largely at our expense, to say the least – and risked retaliation all to strengthen soon-to-be Tower loyalists. Sure they'd be a pain in

Malicia's neck for a while, but was that small a gain really worth such a significant investment? Much as I would have preferred for the answer to be a different one, deep down I knew it was not. I sighed and leaned back into my seat, the lights of the camp around me dimly visible through the entrance flaps of my tent.

I poured myself a finger of brandy, and tried to think of a reason for me to back this that wasn't just making Hakram happy. He'd been good, for a very long time, about never putting me in a position like this – having to choose between him and duty. So damned good I'd allowed myself to forget he wanted things at all. That was a dangerous thing to ignore in my right hand, the keeper of so many of my secrets. But I couldn't just empty my kingdom's coffers just to please him, could I? Gods I rather wanted to, if only so things between us could go back to normal, but it wouldn't be that simple would it?

No, I suspected that if anything accepting when I had so many qualms would only make things worse.

I cast a baleful look at a sheet of parchment detailing the costs and benefits of arming orcs in Callowan steel instead of sending them shipments of dwarven armaments bought in Mercantis, passing a hand through my hair. I'd refrained from calling on Akua when considering this, wanting no contrary opinion tainting my thoughts, and forced myself not to send for Scribe – even though she'd likely have better force estimates for the Clans than anything my people had been able to dig up, on top of the lay of the more recent politics.

"I can't accept this," I admitted to myself quietly.

It was a stark enough admission that I punctuated it by guzzling down the brandy, the burn in my throat and belly distracting from the unpleasantness. I wiped my lips afterwards, reaching for a quill and inkwell, and pawed around until I found a sheath of parchment I could use. I couldn't accept this, I thought but I could at least make it clear why I couldn't accept it. It was better than just refusing, and letting silence have the day. The words came easy, when I got into it, and I found further reasons to hesitate even as I wrote.

For one, the Clans were currently dependent on Praes for many goods and the northernmost Soninke holdings much closer than Callow – how could I be assured the Steppes wouldn't just be pulled back into an eastern alliance down the line by simple dint of needing what the Wasteland could provide quicker than my people could provide it? Callowans were not known as great merchants, and there was no port up the Wasiliti for our river barges to land that wasn't in Praesi hands. I needed answer to more than a dozen questions just as crucial, and so I asked them all. *I cannot in good conscience commit to this proposal at is*

stands, I added at the end. I would, however, be willing to entertain a revised one addressing my concerns.

I bit my lip, a few drops of ink dripping down as my hand hesitated. *I look forward to seeing your work,* I began, then crossed it out. *I expect I will soon see...* No, I thought, and crossed it out again. *I hope that,* crossed. *I believe that there is merit to this,* I finally allowed, *and look forward to the improvements.*

The queen would not allow the woman to say sorry, so this was as close as I'd ever get to saying the word to Hakram.

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I slept uneasily and woke up already tired.

Though we both knew he'd read my answer, Adjutant did not speak a word of it as we ate breakfast and I did not press the matter. While I'd slept the campaign had continued, the ten thousand Firstborn still with my army hunting down nearby wandering bands of undead in the lowlands and wiping them out under moonlight. They'd retreated back to camp before dawn and were now sleeping through it as the remainder of our column prepared to resume the march. I'd be leaving the Third under General Abigail to protect them while our march picked up again, the Levantines once more serving as vanguard.

I'd pulled at the leash yesterday and gone out to fight, but I'd not get such an opportunity again anytime soon. There was no Juniper for me to hand command to as I went hunting for trouble, much to my displeasure – it was my command, for better or worse. The detachments of fantassins and drow we'd sent out yesterday had dug in through dawn but would begin sweeping the region clear of undead soon enough: I got regular reports from both Ivah and Captain-General Catalina about their progress. It looked to be slim pickings, with the enemy force holed up in Luciennerie having sent no raiders down the blue road that we could find.

That worried me.

Why was the Dead King not reacting to our advance? There were three forces that were in position to prove a threat for the offensive. First was the hundred thousand army ahead of my column, no doubt well on its way to Lauzon's Hollow by now. Another of at least one hundred thousand was holding Juvelun to the east, but we were trying to bait it out with Prince Klaus' army. A force at least as large as the others was in Luciennerie, though, and while Princess Rozala was supposed to send raiders out to worry it the absence of reaction from there was raising my hackles.

Luciennerie was a fortress, it wouldn't be easy for raiders to take even if a few dozen thousand dead were sent down to march on our defensive lines north of Arbusans. It was what I would have done, in the Dead King's place: mounted a large enough assault on that defence that my column was forced to strip away detachments to reinforce. It'd weaken us before the clash at the Hollow, and in the worst possible case the Dead King would break through the fort and force our arriving reinforcements from Callow and Procer to face him in a costly field battle before his marauders were driven back.

So why was there only silence from the northwest?

My Lord of Silent Steps had correctly estimated that east of Julianne's Highway was the region I wanted cleared most thoroughly, and it had acted consequently: the Firstborn had gone out there in force overnight and savaged the enemy warbands in the area thoroughly. They'd also paid particular attention to keeping the connection between the mining roads of the east and the Highway clear, which I send a commendation for. So long as that road remained open, the Iron Prince could keep sending us messengers even when he got into territories where scrying broke down. My column's advance went uncontested through the rest of the day, the field ours in every direction according to the reports of my scout. Some of my commanders came to believe we'd caught the Hidden Horror by surprise with our advance, that our timing had been apt.

He might have been focusing his attentions on the offensive against Cleves, they said, the one headed towards Trifelin. Our two-pronged offensive might have caught him with his forces deployed in the wrong places. Some of General Hune's staff argued for us to increase the speed of our offensive because of this theory, and the notion was popular with Princess Beatrice and her army. They were eager to reclaim their capital from Keter, it was a point of pride for them. I stamped down on their ardour, as unless their guesswork was confirmed I saw no reason to change our campaign plan. Just because we could not see the Dead King's preparations did not mean they weren't waiting for us.

On the third day of the march, early in the morning, I got word from Prince Klaus. When he'd sent his messenger his army had just passed Juvelun, where to his dismay the enemy army had refused to engage even when he'd skirmished provocatively. Our early hopes that the raids on his army were the prelude to a greater attack seemed in vain. With the hope of baiting the enemy into a field battle easily gone, he'd followed our contingency plan and begun a forced march towards Malmedit. That would force the enemy army to either follow or risk losing the tunnels there, but noted it would not be difficult for him to keep in contact with my army from now on.

He wished me luck, and in silence I wished him the same. It was not without risks, marching on Malmedit: it left his supply lines open for the enemy to raid, or to block entirely if they decided to leave Juvelun and advance against his back.

It was only half a bell before sundown that I finally got an explanation as to why Luciennerie had gone silent. Princess Rozala sent word by scrying that not only had Keter begun the expected offensive against Trifelin, where she'd fought a field battle and was now suffering a siege, but that there seemed to be another attack afoot. The raiding detachments she'd sent to harass the army in Luciennerie had been ambushed and driven back, but not before catching sight of a Keteran host marching towards the fortress they'd come from. The same one anchoring her eastern flank, Coudrent. My fingers clenched until the knuckles went white when I heard the news.

If the fortress fell, Cleves was in trouble. The dead would have access to the soft underbelly of the principality, and not only would they be able to cut the supply lines of the far-flung capital of Cleves but they'd also be able to strike at the besieged army in Trifelin from behind. It'd be a *crippling* blow. One that could potentially turn our currently steadiest front into a howling disaster over the span of a bare few months. There were Named in Coudrent, though, and a significant defensive force. The fortress would not fall easily. Still, it now looked like the Dead King had decided to gamble on breaking Cleves before we could retake Hainaut.

He must have realized that we'd weakened the defences there to strengthen our offensive here, in troops and Named. It was a bold strategy from an opponent usually more inclined towards patience, but then he could afford the losses better than we could: every battle refilled his ranks while ours dwindled. It would have been a mistake to hide this from my highest officers, so on the same evening I called another war council. It was taken with equanimity on the surface, but it was only skin deep.

"It might be best to end the offensive for now," Razin Tanja reluctantly said, "and instead reinforce Coudrent through the Twilight Ways."

I cocked an eyebrow, almost impressed. It'd be a strategic blunder to do that, in my opinion, but it showed forethought on his part that'd been entirely absent back when we'd tangled at Sarcella. He could recognize, at least, that losing Cleves would be a greater loss than winning Hainaut would be a gain.

"The Hidden Horror could be baiting us," Aquiline reminded him. "We do not know much of what happened out west for certain."

"If anything this reinforces the need to advance swiftly," Grandmaster Talbot argued. "If we smash our way up the Highway,

the enemy might be forced to withdraw the forces they sent out or face losing Hainaut largely uncontested."

"Beg your pardon, lord, but it's only uncontested if the army in Juvelun does what we want and chases the Iron Prince," General Abigail said. "Might be we could take that for granted before, but I'm not so sure we can now."

"Agreed," Princess Beatrice said, startling my general. "Though I would suggest that is even more of a reason to push forward quickly. Unless we become a serious threat on the Enemy's hold of Hainaut, he has no reason to reconsider his offensives. The army in the Hollow needs to be shattered, and soon."

I stayed silence, wanting all here to air their thoughts, but I tended to side with Beatrice Volignac in this. There were still four days of marching between us and the Hollow, if we stayed on Creation, which was starting to look like too long. The Dead King wouldn't have made a move against Coudrent if he didn't believe he could take the fortress, Named or not, and to be honest I was starting to suspect the attack on Trifelin was not to take the place – Rozala Malanza had made it into a butcher's yard for anyone trying to take it – but instead to pin down the Princess of Aequitan's army so it couldn't relieve Coudrent.

"We can't fight a battle with our column spread out as it currently is," General Hune pointed out. "We'll need to recall the drow and the mercenaries first and that'll take at least a day."

A generous estimate. The distances involved were not small, there were no real roads to speak of out there and the forces in question were significantly spread out. Even if we sent the order in an hour, I doubted we'd gather everyone here by tomorrow. I'd bet the morning after, the dawn of our campaign's fifth day, if we were lucky and the fantassins ran themselves ragged.

"It will slow us down to wait for them," Aquiline pointed out.

"Attacking an entrenched force with superior numbers without our full strength would be foolish," Hune bluntly replied.

"We don't need to launch an assault outright," I noted. "We can set up camp facing the Hollow and prepare for battle, and order the detachments to catch up to us there."

It'd have the benefit of having those detachments sweep through the upper lowlands on both sides as they joined us, flushing out undead warbands still in hiding.

"And if the enemy comes out to fight?" Princess Beatrice asked.

"Gods, if only," I wolfishly smiled.

General Abigail let out a small trilling laugh, which sounded either keen or terrified. Her fear aside, I strongly believed that in a field battle we'd smash right through the force the Dead King had sent to hold the Hollow. It was one thing to assault a strong position, another to face bones and Binds on the plains – where our cavalry could come into play and we could force them to come to us as our engines pounded at them.

"Send out the recall orders, we're to gather directly before Lauzon's Hollow," I ordered Hune, then turned my gaze to the rest. "As for our column, prepare your forces for a march through the Twilight Ways. Morning Bell tomorrow is the timeline for beginning to open the portals."

Which meant we'd probably start moving around Noon Bell, realistically. Even the simplest of things became incredibly complicated to achieve, when out campaigning, and time was always the first casualty. My tone was firm and there was no argument, the war council dispersing to see to their orders. We could all feel it, I thought, how much more had come to rest on our shoulders with the latest news. If we failed and Cleves fell, then the Principate would follow. Maybe not the same year, but it would all be downhill from there.

"So we don't fail," I murmured.

The words were cold comfort as I went to sleep.

—

Noon Bell turned out to have been wildly optimistic. For once it wasn't even the fantassins that ended up being a pain in my ass, it was the drow. With Ivah gone their discipline had thinned and they dragged their legs when it came to getting their supply carts in order. Which in turn slowed down the Third Army, which was meant to march into the Twilight Wats after them, and when it became clear that halfway to Noon Bell we were still far from marching the armies that'd gathered had to be released – we couldn't just make the soldiers stand in the sun for hours like scarecrows, hundreds would get heatstroke and discipline would break down.

The upside was that when the Silver Huntress and her party returned from their jaunt into enemy territory, just a little after Noon Bell, I was still there to take their report. Haranguing sigil-holders had stopped being a productive use of my time about two hours ago, so I'd sat down for lunch and had covers set for the Named so they could join me as they gave their account. Unsurprisingly, the tore at even such plain fare with great enthusiasm. I waited until they'd filled their stomachs some before nudging the Silver Huntress into starting to talk.

"We got close to the Hollow," Alexis the Argent said. "It was swarming with soldiers, so even sneaking near the road wasn't an option, but we went up into the hills to the east so we could have a look from there."

She paused, swallowing a piece of jerky and washing it down with a mug of ale.

"The Headhunter was the one who found the goat path that allow us to," the Huntress conceded. "She did good work."

The villain in question only grinned at me, showing crooked but white teeth.

"The rise we found overlooked the army, Your Majesty," the Vagrant Spear said. "The dead are raising fortifications, making ready for us."

Bad news, but not unexpected ones. The dead tended to do as much when they had the time and expected to fight a defensive battles. Unlike the Army of Callow, though, Neshamah's undead hordes did not usually have dedicated engineers or artisans that could serve the same purpose. Sometimes Binds with know-how managed something a little more elaborate than raising palisades and digging ditches, but it was rare.

"Anything to worry about?" I asked.

"Ditches and walls, the usual," Roland told me. "They are concentrating on where Julianne's High passes, but there were several layers being dug when we had our look."

All the more reason to move on them soon, I thought. Even without giving actual battle, when we got close I'd be able to send raiders to disrupt their preparations. I glanced at the Silent Guardian, but though she was clearly paying attention she had nothing to add by gesture. There'd be no talk out of her, of course. Her Name was not an exaggeration – she'd been born mute, way I heard it.

"The Grey Legion was there," the Headhunter said.

She grinned at me again, as surprise appeared on the face of her companions. Evidently, she'd not informed them.

"You saw them?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"I have a Mark on two different soldiers of it," the Headhunter said. "Both were in range."

I nodded. She'd always been vague about what her range actually was with the aspect, or how many of those marks she could have simultaneously, but I'd gathered it was at least several miles.

"You never said a word," the Vagrant Spear indignantly said.

"I'm not your mother, Bloodlet," the Headhunter sneered. "I won't hold you by the hand when you fail."

I whistled sharply, which interrupted before *that* lovely little spat could escalate.

"You can wait until I have my report to tussle," I bluntly said. "Do you have numbers for me?"

"Around ninety thousand infantry," the Silver Huntress said. "Mostly skeletons, though there was a large contingent of ghouls and we won't have seen them all."

"Constructs?" I asked.

"Two wyrms," she grimaced. "And the usual for a frontline force: beorns and tusks, a few vultures and irregular horrors. At least a hundred total, and more they'll have kept hidden in reserve."

Not as bad as I'd expected, although the wyrms would be a problem and the Grey Legion was going to complicate everything just by being there. Either Akua or myself would have to be kept in reserve and fresh for when they came out, else that was going to be a damned costly battle. There just wasn't anything our infantry could do against those things, not even my legionaries.

"Anything else come to mind?" I pressed.

"There were Revenants there," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "At least ten. And there was a shape in the distance, behind the Hollow, that I believe might have been a Crab."

That got my attention, since we'd ever only had unverifiable reports about those existing.

"How sure are you?"

The Headhunter snorted contemptuously.

"Not sure enough to want to risk venturing too far," the villain said.

"Our orders were to avoid combat," the Silver Huntress sharply said. "And we obeyed them. As to the Crab, Your Majesty, it was impossible to tell if it truly was one from so far. There was magical interference as well, we believe."

A 'Crab' was what we'd called the method the Dead King used to keep his armies halfway functional out in the field, when he had no cities to support them. It was a massive skittering necromantic construct, but not one meant to fight: the inside of its armoured shells was supposedly filled with forges, workshops and warehouses. A small moving city meant to allow repair, the creation of fresh constructs and safely carrying necessary goods. Masego believed they were also one of the methods the Dead King used to scramble scrying, as a sort of moving ritual site. We'd never gotten a close look at a Crab, though, as they tended to be kept relatively far behind enemy lines and jealously guarded.

I'd be a significant blow to the Dead King's ability to wage war in Hainaut if we destroyed one, though. There wouldn't be a swift replacement either: Given how expensive and difficult making a construct the size of a small city would be, we were pretty sure there were no more than ten of them in existence. My eyes moved to Roland.

"You didn't answer the question," I noted.

He hesitated.

"I strongly believe it was one," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "The spell I used is essentially a Baalite eye made through sorcery, and though it doesn't show much at great distances what it *does* show is reliable."

I nodded in acknowledgement, drumming my fingers against the table. I tended to put trust in Roland's judgement, cagey and tricky bastard that he was. While bagging the Crab wouldn't be a greater priority than, well, actually beating the enemy army ahead of us I'd keep its existence in mind. It'd be quite the prize to destroy one of those.

"Noted," I said, then changed the subject. "Our approach to the Hollow has changed, we'll be moving out through the Ways as soon as possible and leaving our detachments to catch up to us near the enemy. That makes planning our answer to the Revenants and the enemy's trump cards – the Grey Legion and the wyrms – all the more important."

"There could be more Revenants," the Silver Huntress reminded me. "We cannot be sure."

"That's war," I shrugged. "You can never be sure. But we can plan for what we do know. I'll want a more detailed report on the Revenants you saw once you're done eating, and I'll be calling an assembly of all Named with the column tonight."

That got their attention, considering they were all included in that.

"We'll be discussing match ups for the Revenants," I told them, "and how we might best deal with the constructs you've identified."

Much as I'd prefer not to, we might have to reveal the unravellers to deal with the wyrms if we couldn't get a clean kill otherwise. I'd not get soldiers killed to keep the element of surprise – in other situations I might be willing to make that trade, but not when preserving our strength was so important. The battle ahead of us wasn't the last we'd fight this campaign, and likely not even the hardest. I'd intended on hearing our suggestions from them ahead of the assembly, but it was not to be: before I could prod of them into giving an opinion, Adjutant wheeled his way into the tent.

I caught his eyes, and he indicated for us to move outside.

"You all did good work," I told the seated Named, rising to my feet. "And brought back knowledge that might be the key to victory in the coming battle. The Grand Alliance thanks you all, and you will be commended at the assembly tonight."

It was easy enough to take my leave, since even the most polite among them were hungry and in front of a meal, so I left them to it and joined Hakram as he wheeled his way out.

"Word from Neustal," he said. "Fresh from a runner. The Gigantes wardsmiths have arrived."

Finally, I thought. The Titanomachy had been slow in coughing those out, at least when it came to the Hainaut front. Those who'd gone to Cleves had arrived almost a month ago.

"Good new," I said.

"Their leader sent word to ask whether they should follow behind the column or stay in Neustal until sent for," Hakram told me.

I mulled on that a moment. Was it worth the risk? Honestly, yes. I'd probably be able to squeeze a few things out of them if they were there when we attacked the capital, and until then they'd be useful in repairing and fine-tuning the artefacts they'd already sent us.

"How many of them are there?" I finally asked.

"Twenty-two," Adjutant replied.

I let out a low whistle. That was more than I'd expected, at least the Titanomachy wasn't being stingy with manpower – which, if what Hanno had told them about them was true, was the single they prized the most. There honestly was no way that our troops had missed anything numerous or powerful enough to threaten

twenty-two Gigantes when sweeping through the lowlands here, so there went my last qualms.

"Send them up," I said. "Though with warnings that this is still a war zone, if one we believe secure. If they want to wait until the next supply convoy so they can share the escort, they should feel free to."

They'd still get to the city of Hainaut around the same time we did, by my reckoning.

"I'll see to it," Adjutant replied.

I opened my mouth, to ask about my answer to the proposal, then closed it. I'd already made things worse by pressing too hard once, I thought, it might best let him set the terms of engagement going from here.

"I'll see you later then," I simply replied.

It ended up being near godsdamned Afternoon Bell that the last of our soldiers entered the Twilight Ways, which was the final nail in the coffin of my optimism for this campaign.

Chapter 55: Queen's Pawn

"Let there be no talk of mercy after the ram has touched the gate."

– Queen Elizabeth Alban of Callow

Of all the gifts the Sisters had given me, the peculiar sense I had for the coming of dawn and dusk remained one of the most useful. It would be a little under a bell before sundown, in Creation. Not so here, of course, for the Twilight Ways knew no such change. The timing of this undertaking had been chosen very precisely, as it was no longer a few warbands hitting our dug-in positions that we'd be facing: we were about to come out swinging in front of a field army of the Kingdom of the Dead, the Hidden Horror's host forewarned and prepared for our coming. It was going to be an ugly fight, before we got our defences up.

Spread out on the green and sloping hills of the Twilight Ways, the warriors mustered to take the van in the coming battle were tightening their ranks as the gate-mages finished the last few syllables of their spells. Masego's formula was the one being used, universally so even if it wasn't necessarily the best formula possible for each mage. It was however, the one formula that more than seven in ten of the sufficiently powerful mages of the Grand Alliance were able to use. Numbers had a strength of their own, especially when it came to war. *The pharos devices wouldn't work anywhere as well with disparate formulas, anyway, I*

idly thought. Not that we'd be using our only one tonight, if I had my way.

The evening air grew thick with sorcery and silence spread as the mages each finished their incantation and shaped their sorcery before withholding the last syllable – a guttural sound in the mage tongue that echoed of something like *krakh*. It would only be spoken when I gave my command, painted the night sky with my signal to begin the crossing. Mounted on Zombie and perched atop a hill I held good vantage, and so allowed myself to sweep the assembled forces with my gaze one last time. It was an unfamiliar sight. Our strength had been mustered not in the shape of an army ready for battle, but according to the new rules that warfare through the Ways demanded.

Standing in bands among the hills, near the gates-to-be, the painted warriors of Malaga and Tartessos were waiting to serve as the tip of the spear. Led by Blood and backed by four Named – Vagrant Spear, Headhunter, Sage and Silent Guardian – they would seize the grounds we needed as our first wave. If they got through in the time they'd been given, anyway. Behind them the Second Army stood in good order, ranks of red painted shield and polished helms glinting in the twilight. General Hune's hulking silhouette towered above the ranks, a siege tower made woman.

I'd lead the first rank personally, when we sallied out.

The holding action would be ours.

To the left and right of the Second Army our horse was milling about, one wing led by Grandmaster Talbot and the other by Princess Beatrice. A few mages with them ensured we'd have some measure of flexibility in the coming engagement, though only within limits. Our fantassin companies, under the consolidated command of Captain Reinald, were waiting behind the Second and intermixed with Volignac infantry. It was the Third that'd serve as our reserve: I was counting on Abigail of Summerholm's knack for calculated risks. She'd commit if and when it was needed, but not a moment before. At the back of everyone else stood the drow, a sea of sigils that was not so much a reserve as another force entirely. Their time would come, but they would not share this battle with us. It would have been too much of a waste.

"Into the breach, dearest?" Akua Sahelian idly asked.

I glanced at her. No dress tonight, no silks or velour. The shade had taken the appearance of a daughter of Wolof gone to war, beautiful lamellar plate in red and gold beneath a curved helmet and an aventail of mail that could be fastened with a piece shaped like a black swan. I was in no mood for banter, tonight, and did not pretend otherwise.

"Find your mages and waste no time," I said. "Your hands will decide how much the butcher's due tonight."

"Then luck in battle, my heart," Akua smiled.

"Luck's for the other side," I replied. "We make due with plans."

And as she melted into the shadows, I raised my staff and pulled at the Night as I unleashed a great spurt of power. The bright light that bloomed in the sky exploded in silent streaks of colour, and with that unmissable sight the battle began. Mages finished their incantations, magic held back at last unleashed: the Twilight Ways shivered and seventy-two different gates into Creation opened. Most weren't even large enough for two people, with a mere twenty of proper size to let carts and engines through, but that was why we were sending the Levantines out first. They were quick on their feet and used to fighting without formations.

Clamour in Levantine tongues went up, war cries filling the air as the warriors boldly went forth through the gates. *Honour to the Blood*, they clamoured. *Honour to Levant, honour in strife*. I'd found a thick shield and a knack for ducking more useful than honour, as a rule, but I would not deny their ways when they lit a fire in their bellies. I kept my eyes on the bands filing through, counting down as the warriors passed. The Enemy was slow, tonight, or we got lucky: it was thirty one heartbeats before Keter gave its answer. More than half the gates – but not the large ones, thank the Gods – flickered, shredding whatever flesh and metal had been going through in a red spray.

So that was to be the first beat of our dance tonight, huh. *Thirty one heartbeats*. The Dead King's mages were getting sloppy, if it'd taken them this long to disturb our gates with their counter-rituals. Banners were raised by the gates and drums brought to the fore, so that through their beating the rhythm could be kept. For thirty beats Levantines continued to cross, then halted. The gates rippled again, taking the leg of some screaming young warrior who'd been foolhardy enough to try the odds. It wouldn't be the last time today it happened. The bleeding man was dragged through and the crossings resumed.

For now I was not needed. The first hour belonged to the Dominion of Levant, tasked to clear the grounds in front of us so that when the Second Army began its crossing we had room enough to set down wards and protections undisturbed. Depending on what the enemy had waiting on the other side, that hour would either be a pleasant moonlit walk or a bloody horror of screams. The lagging counter-rituals gave me hope for the former, but hope would not serve me well in a battle with Keter. I'd learned that the hard way. Time dragged forward as the warriors passed through the gates in a trickle – hundreds, then thousands – but I watched in silence. My escort dared not disturb me. It was only when I sensed the time nearing that I headed out, spurring Zombie forward. An escort of twenty knights from the Order of the Broken

Bells behind me, I headed towards the Second Army at a brisk trot.

Soldiers under half a hundred different banners cheered sparsely as I went by, for even though few of them were mine I was known as a good woman to have on your side when the steel came out. Though later I would fight on the front, for now I went to Hune. Looking down at me, the ogre gave a brisk salute.

"First reports?" I asked.

"The enemy was already mobilized," General Hune said. "We'll be doing it the hard way: ghoul packs were already afoot so it was contested from the start. Keter has pulled in every patrol in a radius of miles to slow us down. We're looking at thousands, not hundreds."

My lips thinned. I'd known that Keter would be expecting us to pop out soon, but not anticipated large enemy forces this far out: our beachhead was at least ten miles away from Lauzon's Hollow!

"If it were an easy war, we would already have won it," I said. "Watch your back, general."

"Good hunting, Your Majesty," Hune replied.

Dismounting Zombie and handing her reins over to my knightly escort, I went to stand with the front rank of the Second. The company was under the command of a Captain Bolah, a dark-skinned veteran who'd once served in the Legions, but it was her young Callowan lieutenant – Alfred of Ankou, he eagerly introduced himself as – who stood closest to me. Before long the two Named that were to serve as my retinue for the fight made their appearance, having been lingering nearby but away from my troops.

"I don't believe we've ever shared a battle before," Roland noted, coming to stand at my left.

He'd prudently added a helmet to the mail and longcoat he refused to set aside.

"Not on the same side, at least," I acknowledged.

The Beastmaster, on my right was not inclined to idle talk. His eyes stayed on the banners near the gates.

"Time will run out soon," Lysander grunted.

I nodded in agreement. It was unfortunate, but it didn't look like the Dominion would be able to get all their warriors across in the time we'd allotted for it. Before long trumpets sounded, signifying the warriors of Levant were to move to the sides and clear the gates, which got... contentious. None of that proud lot

wanted to be denied the opportunity to battle because they'd been a little too slow, and some gates had to be forcefully cleared of Levantines trying to force their way in. Behind us the Second Army raised its banners, horns were sounded and the advance began.

Unlike the Dominion forces, my Army of Callow had standard company sizes and officers ensuring order so instead of a mess of warbands it was neatly filed lines matched to gate sizes that approached specific gates. My own company, Captain Bolah's, was bound for one of the larger gates – part of the reason I'd picked it – and before long we were standing in front of the transparent veil, the mage maintaining it standing to the side with closed eyes and two assistants. On the other flank the drummer kept pace, while a Proceran held the banner telling us the number of the gate and a young woman by his side shouted at us hurry.

A heartbeat later we were through and the cool evening air of the Hainaut lowlands washed over my face. *Shit*, I immediately thought, even as Beastmaster contorted and a veritable flock of birds erupted from his furs to fly above. I could now see why the Dominion had found it hard to get people through, and it wasn't just inferior discipline. The gates has all been opened along the same axis, though the line itself was wavy from imprecisions, and near the left side of that axis bands of Dominion were being hard-pressed by a surprisingly large number ghouls. There just hadn't been much room for more people to pour through, even when there'd been time.

Streaks of Light told me the Lanterns were in the thick of it, as was their wont, but their tricks weren't the ones I'd been looking for.

"Beastmaster," I said, limping forward as the legionaries advanced behind me. "Where's the Vagrant Spear?"

She should be handling that flank along with the Headhunter, but I saw no sign of her. The other villain's steps slowed a heartbeat as he saw through the eyes of one the birds in flight, then he pointed to the left.

"There," he said. "Pulling one of your lordlings out of trouble, looks like. Osen. Wounded. I see blood."

I swallowed a curse. Already? No, that was unfair. Likely the dead had gone specifically after her, knowing her death would brutalize Dominion morale. The issue was that there would only be Lanterns near and that lot couldn't heal. The Forsworn Healer was on his way, but he was with the third wave of Named near the *back* of the Second Army.

"Roland," I tightly said. "Go patch her up."

"On it," the Rogue Sorcerer nodded.

He was gone in a moment, stride near a run as his long coat swirled behind him. Gods, if only I could have a dozen more of him.

"With me, Beastmaster," I said. "And I want a warning when the first tide gets close."

"I see it approaching already," the man murmured. "Hurry, Black Queen."

A quick look behind me told me all of Captain Bolah's company had crossed and it was now in good order, waiting for my instructions even as another company began to emerge behind it.

"With me," I yelled. "We'll set the boundary."

I got a roar back. Good, they'd need the spirit before this was over. Much as I would have liked to head to the left flank and stabilize our lines there, I had other duties. Besides, we had a contingency that should take care of it before long. A messenger should have gone through the dedicated gate by now. A hundred legionaries in tight formation behind me, I limped to the front. The Dominion had formed up into three large clumps of warriors after crossing— shield walls that'd suffered under ghoul assaults, most likely — with the two more or less to the right having held well and only the one to the left having gotten mauled by the dead.

Out of the seventeen thousand Dominion warriors maybe ten thousand had gotten through in the half hour they'd had, a testament to their light-footedness given the situation. There couldn't have been more than three thousand ghouls and maybe half that in skeletons out here right now, all spread out, but up close ghouls were bloody and hard to kill even. We'd be winning this fight, for sure, but it would cost us precious time and keep us from seizing the territory we wanted before the first tide hit. I grit my teeth, in a black mood, and led my company three hundred feet out before calling a halt.

"Here," I shouted. "Form up."

Maybe twenty feet ahead of us the Tanja forces were cleaning up the last of their undead. Among the ranks I glimpsed the Sage and the Silent Guardian, whose assigned flank this was. On the other left side four large gates opened and our first surprise of the night came out at a gallop: Grandmaster Talbot led out the Order and some Dominion light horse in wedges, smoothly coming around to hit the ghouls that'd been chewing up the Osenia in the back. Long lances skewered the creatures and Levantines butchered them after they were pinned, leaving the Order free to peel off the engagement quickly and with few casualties.

They retreated the Twilight Ways without wasting time, as the last thing we wanted was to risk them out here for too long. Cavalry was not easily replaced, and the Dead King was always hungry to steal it for his own armies. With the pressure taken off of them, the Levantines on the left flank pushed forward at last. I worried my lip, eyes on the moving soldiers. Using my location as the yardstick the Second Army had begun taking position in a broad hollow square, but the left third of that square was noticeably lagging behind the rest. It wouldn't be ready in time, would it?

"Beastmaster?" I asked.

"You'll start seeing them in a moment," he replied. "And hearing them not long after."

"Fuck," I snarled. "They'll hit us long before the cabals are in position."

Much less the wards, whose raising would be further delayed. Akua was good, and I'd glimpsed her crossing through with mages and wardstones, but she couldn't conjure up a stable array out of thin air. She needed room that she just wouldn't have.

Beastmaster's warning proved true moments later: in the distance I saw what I might have taken as a swarm of insects, were it not too far out for their size to be reasonable. Birds, they were birds. Not buzzards, which were specially-crafted dead, but just any bird the Dead King had been able to get his hands on. His forces slaughtered and poisoned all wildlife wherever they went so that they could use this very tactic: throwing massive flocks and herds of them at us as skirmishers.

Like a tidal wave filling the sky, they came.

"I'll handle it myself," I finally said.

There went one of the two large workings I'd be able to throw around in daylight.

Striding forward with more anger to my stride than I'd care to admit, I left behind my legionaries after a curt gesture signifying they shouldn't follow. Beastmaster kept pace with me, looking oddly at ease in the middle of mayhem. The warriors from Malaga had been thorough about putting down the dead, but sloppy with clean up: with my staff I shoved aside a painted warrior before the back of her knee could be stabbed by a crawling half-broken skeleton, my boot going through its skull with a wet crunch. I ignored whatever she said to me in Ceseo and kept limping ahead. The Levantines split for me, almost respectfully.

By the time I got to the front, stepping away from my armies with no one but Beastmaster at my side, the tide of undead birds was closer. Close enough no one could miss them, close enough that

the beat of their wings and their ceaseless *screeching* hit our ears like a drumbeat. One coming ever closer as dead things filled the horizon. The birds would only be the first tide, I knew. They were just the quickest to make their way to our lines. Behind us I felt the Dominion warriors shrink. I'd seen some of those same people leap into a siege tower on fire without batting an eye, face Revenants with gleeful whoops, but this breed of horror always hit them hard: what honour could there be in being shredded by dead birds?

Neshamah had made of study of us, of what got into our heads and put lead in our legs.

"You have means to deal with them?" the Beastmaster asked.

"Sure," I replied with a hard smile, "it's called *force*."

To my surprise, that startled a laugh out of the usually humorless man.

"Don't let me get into your way then, Black Queen," Lysander said.

A snort was my only answer. As if. I took another few limping steps forward, loosening my shoulders under the cuirass and taking a good look at the advancing tide. Hadn't rained in a while, had it? I knelt down, leaning my staff, and traced the ground with a few fingers. Dry. I hoisted myself back up with a grunt.

"You never taught me a prayer for this," I said in Crepuscular. "An invocation. I imagine there isn't one."

I smiled at doom coming on darkened wings.

"Shall we make one together?"

On my shoulders I felt sharp talons dig into the skin, almost enough to draw blood. I had their attention and, closing my eyes, I breathed out and sunk into the Night. I pulled it deep into me until it was writhing in my veins like serpents of smoke.

"I have come a long way, through winding paths," I murmured, and cocked my head to the side to better hear them.

It was neither a murmur nor the beat of wings, and somehow both.

"Yet behold," I said, Andronike's cool disregard given voice, "this barren realm, this crown of ruin!"

And her sister was not far behind, leaning close to hisper into my ear – every syllable a caw, a greedy call of carrion.

"Let me match horror with horror, might with might," I said, Komena's poisonous pride made verdict. "And know no master in this."

The Night roiled, the sea boiling out of me in dusky vapour, and I almost smiled. They had left me the honour of the last touch.

"So let the sun weep and the Crows have their due," I spoke in a rasping laugh. "For in the end, all will be Night."

I felt the Sisters smile against the sides of my neck. This one, they whispered, would be known as mine. *Catherine's Tears*. Above the tide of carrion birds the sky howled with gales as the Night left me, leaving me buckling down to my knees and hollowed out. My vision swam, but not so much I did not see my work: the power forming into a great sun of black flames, pulsing and screeching almost as loud as the undead. And the tide moved to split around it, but it wouldn't be enough. I pushed myself up with my staff, and raised a trembling hand.

I snapped a finger and all the Hells went loose.

The black sun blew up in a wave of heat, long streaks of dark flame lashing out and carving streaks of ash through the undead. Like black comets seething strokes shot out, burning as they went and smashing into the plains below with enough might to have the ground shivering even where I stood. Droplets of black fire fell like rain, igniting the carrion dead, and I watched with a cold smile as entire swaths of the enemy burned. Soon the smell of burning bone and flesh would come to us with the wind, but for now I turned around and began my limp back to my lines. The Beastmaster's followed, face gone blank.

A sky-shaking roar came as the Dominion and the Second Army gave their approval to my work, but no smile touched my face. I'd dug deeper than I'd planned to – my legs still shook and my arms felt numb – so I could not guarantee I'd be able to pull something on the same scale again. Not anytime soon, anyway.

It'd not been enough to blot out the birds, but it'd slow them down. The undead things had scattered every which way, so they'd take time to regroup, and I could generously be said to have at most destroyed half of the lot. It'd be long enough for the Dominion left to have put itself in position, hopefully, because otherwise there was going to be an awful lot of blood on the floor and soon. My face grew grimmer as I got closer to our formations and saw we were still behind. The Second Army wasn't entirely on the field yet, and that meant we'd be understrength when it came to priests – the kind that could make shields, anyways.

While I could have gone to the command node of the Second, all I'd do there was get in Hune's way. She already knew the damned

plan, she'd helped make it. Getting too close to Akua's work would be a risk as well, since I was pretty much a moving mass of Night even when not actively using it, so the frontline was the best place for me. The Second Army had moved into cohorts, with furrows behind them, and as I got back to Captain Bolah's company the first trumpets sounded. The Dominion moved down the furrows to stand behind the Army of Callow formations, with some relief I fancied.

The winged undead were already beginning to gather in great swarms. As soon as the Dominion was behind them, the Second Army's standards were raised and horns sounded: the lines closed and shields went up, a solid wall of steel becoming the frontline as mage cabals got into position. Ahead of us, the tide had entirely formed anew. It was closer now, and the cacophony of screeches was once more deafening. *Four hundred feet*, I thought, watching. *Three hundred feet*. Around me legionaries shifted uneasily.

"Steady," I called out. "Trust in your officers. We're ready for them."

That got a few shouts back, and swords were hammered against shields. *Two hundred feet*. The shrill screeches washed over us like a physical wave. Screams erupted behind us, not of fear or dismay but battle cries as the House Insurgent slashed out with Light. *Callow*, some simply shouted. Cries of *For the Kingdom* or *Gods Unforgiving* with them, and even a few *Only to the Just*. Like a volley of arrows javelins of Light went flying, prayers to Above brightening the air. *One hundred feet*. One, two, three volley followed and then at fifty feet, when the noise was like a rolling thunder in our faces, transparent panes of sorcery bloomed in front of us. Like a sorcerous tortoise formation, the rectangular angled shields came down as armour and muted the cacophony.

It was not airtight. Some birds went through, and with a tired hand I drew my sword to hack at a rotting blue jay as its talons clawed pointlessly at my cuirass, but those few were a pittance compared to the angry tide hammering at the magical defence. In some places the shields flickered or outright broke under the pressure, but we had mage reserves and the House Insurgent had been tasked with purging breaches.

Captain Bolah's company was untroubled, so I clapped her young lieutenant's shoulder and called for Beastmaster to follow me. We would be most useful plugging breaches for now. The Second Army finished ferrying across its numbers early, but still too late: by then the second tide had struck. Insects, come on smaller wings. Flies and hornets, until larger things like beetles and stingers and butterflies came up. Unlike the birds, they were capable of digging under the rim of the shields and going up.

Twice I torched a stretch when swarms became large enough they devoured soldiers alive, Roland coming back to my side for the grim business after having healed Aquiline Osená.

Sappers came forward and burned the insects out with torches and pitch, but it wasn't enough. We had to pull mages from shielding to defend against the insects, and it shrank our defences. More panes began failing when our intricate patterns began losing strength, dozens of soldiers dying to every breach before the House Insurgents and the Lanterns, come to reinforce them, could purge the invaders. The third tide hit just as the first Procerans began crossing through, and to my relief Juniper – Hune, I caught myself, it was not the Hellhound in the deeps with me this time – had called for priests to cross first.

When vermin and wild animals began to hammer at the shields and wriggle under them, less numerous than birds or insects but much stronger, we finally got to dismiss entire sections of the defence and remake them anew in pale yellow Light. It burned the dead when they touched them, though not as much as more concentrated amounts would have. We focused our defenses anew, breaches becoming rarer as the work became more distributed, and in some places our people even began to lower panels to bait the dead into deadly Light volleys.

"It's turning in our favour," Roland told me, panting and sweat-soaked.

"For now," I grunted back. "Still an hour and half before sundown"

"They'll pull away before that," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "They have to."

He might be right, I thought. The Dead King had to know we had Firstborn with us, and on weak undead like this roving packs of Mighty would be pure butchery. But the assault from the hordes wasn't slacking and that boded ill. He had at least one last nasty trick left for us, and I could hazard a good guess at what it might be.

"Send for our sword," I told Roland. "I expect we're about to have an unpleasant turn."

It didn't make me a prophet to predict hard times when fighting Keter, but I felt a sliver of dark satisfaction anyway when the hammer blow did come. With so much magic and Light out in the air, it'd been damned impossible for even Named to smell it when a force had approached us under the Dead King's favourite hiding enchantments: we didn't realize a thing until a wave of skeletons broke through a weaker section of the shields and hit the Army of Callow's shield wall. The swarms poured in with them, a potential

catastrophe, but Hune responded as swiftly and ruthlessly as she'd been taught in the War College.

The entire beachhead was purged in a wave of fire and Light, including at least half a company of our own soldiers. We would have lost a lot more, I told myself, if the gap had spread.

I'd not intervened yet because I didn't believe that was the last blow, and once more I was proved right: an entire section of our defences shattered a heartbeat later as half a dozen vultures with Revenants on their backs broke through the 'ceiling'. I wasn't close to enough to help much, to my irritation: I only got off a few shots of flame from a distance, and by the time Zombie came to my side the Revenants were already on the ground. I'd had a band of five waiting for this, our sword. Archer and the Silver Huntress were among them, but while they went through the vultures like butter the Revenants were another story.

They didn't stay and fight the Named, they just *killed*.

The dead Named butchered their way through the Levantines and my soldiers, each heading out towards a different part of the shielding even as masses of birds poured through the gaping hole they'd made in the ceiling. The sorcery and Light that shot up in answer wasn't enough, like someone trying to stop a river with a spear stroke. I almost reached for Night again, I was recovered enough to do *something*, but breathed out in relief when massive spinning blades of Light erupted just above our troops and began shooting upwards.

The Blessed Artificer had come through the gate, arriving with the third wave of Named.

Enough dead had flown through already that dozens more soldiers died before the carrion could be destroyed, and we did not catch a single fucking Revenant as they fought their way out – and, even worse, opened breaches as they did. Fuck, and we'd barely learned anything about what they could do too. I secured two breaches with my escorts as the shielded ceiling was painstakingly restored, and a moment later Creation shivered. I grinned tiredly: Akua had finally anchored the wards, thank the Gods. Unlike the first few times the Dead King wouldn't do us the favour of grinding his expendables to dust on our defences, so to the ragged cheering of the army the swarms went still and then began to retreat.

Half an hour left until sundown.

Still on Zombie's back, my face was grim as I looked around us. Though the battle had gone well, better than we'd expected even – there'd been no need to commit the Procerans or even the Third to very risky flanking actions – we'd still lost more than a thousand, at a glance. At least half over that in wounded too,

though the priests would see to that some. As night began to fall and the hard work of building the camp into a defensive position was undertaken under torchlight and magelights, I found myself approached by a silent ring of thin silhouettes with painted faces. The sigil-holders of the Firstborn bowed when I turned to them, and I offered a hard smile.

"Prepare your sigils," I said. "We raid, Mighty."

The answering smiles were fearsomethings, for these were a fearsome lot.

It was our turn, now.

Chapter 56: Repertoires

"There is no such thing as an unusable army, only armies that are not properly used."

– Aretha the Raven, Nicaean general

We did not come as an army, not the kind I'd raised and led and fought against. The Firstborn followed in my wake like a trail of colourful armed gangs, advancing without formation and answering to no single general. Ten thousand of the Firstborn had come raiding with me, the eerie grace of their stride belying the disorder of their advance. Few of their sigils resembled each other, be it in looks or composition. My old servant Lord Soln now led hardened elites in steel and obsidian, its circular sigil of grey and red painted over faces and mail, while the numerous sigil of Mighty Kuresnik eschewed armour entirely in favour of long barbed spears and dyed green hair like their sigil-holder.

Through the winding hills of the Twilight Ways they followed me in silence, my dead mount's gallop keeping me ahead of even the quickest among them. Of the sigils that had answered my call, the greatest Mighty were Soln – once a lord in my short-lived Peerage, and still instinctively deferential to me even when it preferred otherwise – and Sudone, who back during the Iserran campaign had once challenged me and since been taught better. Three days stripped of all Night had humbled it, but though fear had given way to insolence it loved me not. No matter. When it came to commanding loyalty among the drow, fear was more than enough. They would both serve as my captains when the time came.

And it would come soon, for our departure had been swift. It had left all the work that inevitably followed the end of a battle in the hands of General Hune and the Blood, but that'd not been a choice born of shirking but of a pragmatic consideration: so long as we took the Twilight Ways, we'd reach the enemy's camp before the Revenants could return. Stripped of their vulture mounts by Archer and Huntress doing, they'd have to make their way back on

foot and stuck on Creation. Less than an hour had since been spent treading the paths of Twilight, but already I could feel we were reaching the end of our journey. Just a few more hills and we'd be there, which meant it was time to appoint my captains.

I stroked Zombie's mane, silently instructing her to slow her gait, and shortly closed my eyes. In a twist of will I pulled at Lord Soln and Mighty Sudone through the Night, as if tugging a bridle, and before long tendrils of shadow trailed Zombie's hooves along the ground. The Mighty smoothly leapt of the darkness, each landing at a full run and never breaking stride. But a heartbeat later we were atop a hill overlooking a small vale where I could sense our crossing awaited, so bade Zombie to halt and the drow smoothly mirrored her. With them no longer moving, I got a better look at the pair I'd summoned.

Soln's sigil, a ring of swords with an open mouth at the centre, had been enameled into the side of a helmet of clear Proceran make. It hid its eyes from sight, if not the long pale hair that went down its back. Beneath that affectation it wore ornate ringmail under its obsidian cuirass, going down into knee-length mail skirt ending in obsidian greaves covering leather boots. Soln had a martial look to it and bore both sword and spear, two of the three traditional arms of the Firstborn. Like most of those who had once been in my Peerage, my once Lord of Shallow Graves had thrived in the war against Keter: taking Night and loot from the dead had allowed it to slowly turn its sigil into a hardened and finely equipped warband. Its sigil-oath, I'd been told, related to the sharing and obtaining of such equipment: even dzulu were promised mail and steel weapons. It was not a grand oath like Rumena had made, but it had made the Soln an attractive sigil for many in this time of war.

Sudone's appearance was rather more lavish. Its sigil was woven into many tresses as small coloured stones that made the wavelike blue and green patterns look like they were following some eldritch tide, almost hypnotic to look at. Its 'armour' was a decorative breastplate of dyed leather so heavily encrusted with lapis lazuli as to be useless even if it *didn't* inexplicably have a neckline. Beneath it were only long gauzy robes in shades of blue and green, though there were enough layers its body could not really be made up beneath – but the different colours made it look as if it were rippling, likely the intent.

It was impressive and unique, as had often been the way with sigil-holders in the Everdark.

Sudone's only weapon was a long obsidian-tipped glaive and like many traditionalists it disdained the 'new ways' learned in the Burning Lands, mocking armour and 'dressing up dzulu' as being some kind of perverted fixation for Mighty grown feeble in the head. The Sudone and other traditionalist sigils often took

harder losses in battle, but the old-fashioned way they distributed Night also tended to mean they had more powerful Mighty. Those two were, in a way, emblematic of the currents that were beginning to pull Firstborn society two very different ways.

Mind you, the traditionalist here did not have the better reputation of the two. Sudone was taller than Soln in body, and perhaps stronger in the Night, but it was also what the drow called *radhular*. It translated roughly to 'glad-joiner', and was an insult some Firstborn used for Mighty who preferred to act through cabals and alliances instead of picking an honest fight. The connotation was that drow like Sudone only fought when the odds were on their side, something most Firstborn would be quite offended to be told. The essence of the Tenets of Night, after all, was to rise in power by taking it from others.

I'd been silent for too long, I realized, lost in my thoughts as I'd been. Both were looking at me without hiding their wariness.

"Watch closely," I said, "as neither of you were with the host when we took Lauzon's Hollow last summer."

Lightly tapping the dewy grass of the hill, I let Night ripple out and shaped it as the broad strokes of what the location we'd be raiding would look like. Julianne's Highway, going from south to north, would furrow between steep-sloped and tightly nestled hills.

"The Silver Huntress and her cabal tell us that the entrance has been fortified by the enemy," I said.

My staff traced ditches and walls not only in the furrow between the hills, but also in a broad half-circle in front of them. Keter had not spared work in preparing for us, though these defences were not yet finished.

"Deeper in, we approach the Hollow proper," I continued.

Night continued to slowly ripple forward, depicting the way the furrow would continue into the hills until it reached a bowl-like valley, its surrounding slopes so eroded by rain as to be nearly vertical walls.

"There was once a village there, Lauzon, for which the hollow was named," I said. "Some structures should still stand, and the enemy is likely to be using them as warehouses. There will be many undead here, and perhaps even Revenants."

In fact the village was named for a folk heroine named Lauzon who'd supposedly beaten back a great army of bandits here and then founded a village when the prince gave her the land as a reward, but I saw no need to needlessly confuse the matter. Night continued to crawl, shaping the latter end of the pass: a wavy,

hilly road with several large alcoves that eventually led back to open grounds.

"There will be enemies on the road," I continued, "but the larger part of the enemy's camp is out in the open beyond the pass."

There just wasn't enough room to cram a hundred thousand people in the pass itself, even if Keteran armies didn't have to deal with the usual disease outbreaks that came from cramming soldiers tightly together for long times. The two Mighty were watching closely, and not only because I'd ordered. There were no sigil-holders alive who were not practiced raiders, aware of the importance of knowing the lay of the land.

"We will split our force in three," I said. "So that we might make the most of this night."

"Wise," Mighty Sudone muttered. "We will not find a soft belly twice."

I nodded, then turned my gaze to the other sigi-holder.

"Lord Soln," I said, and watched the title ripple through its frame. "You will take to a third of our force and strike at the enemy's fortifications."

The bottom of my staff tapped the entrance of the pass, in particular the walls and ditches nestled between the hills. Pickler's engines would be able to reduce fortifications out in the open, but further in it'd get tricky. Best take care of that potential bottleneck now, as no one did attrition warfare like Keter.

"Leave no wall standing and sweep all in your way," I ordered.

"It will be as you say, Losara Queen," the drow that had once been my Lord of Shallow Graves replied, pressing hand over heart. "The dead will die once more."

My gaze moved to Sudone, whose silver-blue eyes watched me unblinkingly.

"You will lead one third of our force as well, Mighty Sudone," I said, and tapped the northern edge of the pass.

Near the open grounds where the camp lay, but not too far out.

"Your duty is hunt down the Enemy's ritual-makers and destroy them," I bluntly said. "Sow ruin where you may, but it is those skulls above all others I require of you."

It was a fantasy for the raid to be able to rid us of Neshamah's mages, but we could at least hamper is ability to hammer away at us with rituals. It was always Binds who were capable of magic,

never the lesser undead we called Bones, so great concentrations of their kind were usually knots of sorcerers – when they served as officers for his armies, the Dead King used them rather more sparingly. Made sense, considering he had a limited stock of Binds and massive hordes of Bones. Just because Keter's logistics were different than ours didn't mean its armies were entirely without them.

"Your word is that of Sve Noc, First Under the Night," Sudone replied, mirroring Soln's own salute. "Their will be done."

It would do. Sudone was a better match for the mage-hunt, given that Soln was a great deal more prone to... blunt approaches. It was no Jindrich, mind you, but Sudone was a lot less likely to end up overreaching when it hit the edge of the enemy camp.

"I will lead the last third myself," I said. "You may pick whatever sigils you like to assemble your war party, but I claim three for myself: Brezlej, Randebog and Kuresnik."

A pair of eyes, a shield and a swift spear. Those three, as much the Mighty as the sigils they had shaped, were at the heart of my plan for my part of the raid. Neither of the three were considered among the greatest Mighty of the host, either, so it wasn't even like I'd be stepping on the toes of my two captains by claiming them.

"And should we both seek the same sigil?" Sudone asked.

I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth.

"I would expect the matter to be settled in concord between you two," I said. "I have no patience for foolishness tonight."

"As you say, First Under the Night," Mighty Sudone murmured in reply.

Not convinced, that one. It would have preferred a fight. Sudone's sigil had grown smaller in the years since the giving of sigil-oaths had become a law of the Firstborn, for its rule was particularly brutal to dzulu. Yet those that remained, and those that had since joined, were hard-nosed traditionalists. That lesser Mighty and even dzulu would be willing to become Sudone knowing they'd be treated like expendable things had startled me, but then the Everdark's traditions were not something easily set aside even when those traditions were at your expense.

"Might this one ask what deeds you will seek tonight?" Lord Soln delicately asked.

Flattery and not genuine deference this time, I gauged. Not that it made any difference.

"Havoc," I replied, baring my teeth as my staff came to rest on the valley that had given the pass its name. "Havoc is my business tonight, Lord of Shallow Graves."

While they went about their sabotage, I was going to return to my roots: I'd make enough of a bloody ruckus that Keter would not dare to look elsewhere.

"Is it not always, Losara Queen?" Mighty Sudone laughed.

It bowed to me, allowing the gesture to end its presence as it dissolved into shadow.

"Our deeds will be worthy," Lord Soln promised me, "of an empire ever dark."

It followed suit, though not quite as smoothly. As for me, I closed my eyes and let Zombie guide me towards the last of the distance to the needle-hole that would take us out of the Twilight Ways and into the heart of the enemy camp. Letting the Night flow through my veins, I listened through the sea of thoughts and emotions as my two captains picked their sigils. They went swiftly, the unspoken competition having hurried them as I had wished, and when the last of the sigil-holders, a Mighty Finarok, went over to Sudone I leaned forward with a smile. The darkness came eagerly when called.

"You ride with me," I murmured.

It carried through the Night, like a whisper into the ears of my raiders. Fear and excitement bloomed, along with an undercurrent of *hunger*. Oh yes, I mused, these would do nicely. The sigil-holders among them I pulled to me as my mount slowed and then stopped before the very stretch of grass where we would cross. First those I had wanted most: wary Brezlej, grizzled Randebog and bold Kuresnik. But the others as well, the whole throng of them, with only the most eye-catching standing distinguished from the rest. One-armed Vudaga bedecked in jewels, Darissim with the bone-white tattoos and its ebony spear, even bloody Ogoviz – smaller than me, almost childlike, and having never worn paint not made of Mighty's blood.

Even the least of them had been around for a century, and there some here who had been blooding their spears for longer than anyone save elves could live.

"Sudone has been made a hunter of hunters," I told them. "And Soln will destroy the works of the Enemy. Ours is to be the hour of the sword, Mighty. Bare and bloody."

I swept the sigil-holders with my gaze, holding them there long enough for them to look away.

"We will war in the manner I have arranged," I said. "Listen close now, for you will bring those words to your sigils."

Nothing too sophisticated would work with Firstborn. They weren't trained soldiers, and though by now they were veterans one and all it would be decades before a proper drow war doctrine could be made – just adapting the Legion one to Firstborn peculiarities was bound to fail, and spectacularly. So it was tactics in broad strokes I presented them with. Skirmishers out front, the sigils heavy on them taking the vanguard when we crossed. After the first few exchanges armoured sigils would strike in the thick of the enemy, and those few small sigils that were heavy on Mighty were to hunt constructs and Revenants at the exclusion of all else.

The tactics were not new to them, and I trusted they would be carried out skillfully. The dismissal was swift, save for three I held back. Brezlej, Randebog, Kuresnik. I met their eyes, sensing their unease in the Night.

"I have a particular use for you," I smiled.

They listened, and when I was certain they'd understood I dismissed them as well. Not a moment too early, either. Our way out was just before us, and the forces of Soln and Sudone were nearing their own ways out. Orders trickling down from sigil-holders to sigil, my third of the forces gracefully repositioned into the rough order of battle I'd outlined and resumed its advance. We would be the first into the fire, to draw the most attention.

Within moments crossed, and the hour of the sword began.

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Two hundred of us, Mighty and dzulu, slipped into Creation.

By the time feet had touched solid ground, the first volley had already been thrown. Keter did not field many bowmen – bows required too much upkeep – but that hardly meant the armies of the Dead King were without ranged weapons: iron-tipped javelins came down as a rain. Two dzulu were unlucky enough to take a sharp tip through the chest before they could liquefy into shadows, but they were the only casualties from the first round. Drow skirmishers were damnably hard to kill. I batted aside the sole javelin chunked at me – it would have punched through my shoulder, by the angle – with my staff and took an assessing look around.

I almost let out an impressed whistle as a second wave of drow came into Creation, for Keter had been *busy*. All around us the dead turned to match the threat. Already a second volley of javelins was in flight even as drow began to emerge from the

shadow tendrils closer to the enemy, but the sigil-holder for the Serbanad howled as it unleashed Night and the javelins froze in mid-air, momentum stolen from them. They clattered to the ground a moment later, even as I pulled Night to my eyes and tried to figure out the lay of the enemy's fresh works. The abandoned village of Lauzon had been rebuilt into fortified stone warehouses, but that wasn't unexpected.

The surprise was the scaffolding going up the eastern and western sides of the hollow, intricate sets of stairs and even pulley-lifts. In the darkness I glimpsed hulking shapes atop the hills where the scaffolding led, not constructs but instead engines of war. My brow rose, as those were rare – Neshamah usually preferred his horrors, as they could be used in more ways than simple engines. Which meant, I grimly thought, that these were unlikely to be simple engines at all.

We had maybe half an hour to spare before this got too dangerous to continue, so there was no time to waste. My skirmishers were already on their fourth wave through and they'd closed the distance with the dead, going up close with the skeletons in mismatched armour the Dead King had crammed here. More threatening were the warbands of heavy infantry near the entrance to the hollow: tall skeletons in heavy armour, wielding long spears and greatshields. If my vanguard got in close with those it'd be slaughter, so I breathed out and let Night flood through my veins. A few javelins were thrown at me, but two ispe in Volvich paint had stayed as guard dogs and they shredded the projectiles with howling bursts of air.

I struck the ground with my staff, letting Night crawl out in thin tendrils like spiderwebs along the ground. With every heartbeat more of the hollow was covered, until the crisscrossing covered the full grounds. Firstborn stepped on the darkness without consequences, which had been the tricky part, but where the undead made contact they found the working stuck to them like glue. Much less exhausting than a destructive miracle, and almost as effective: given the size of the heavy infantry and their lack of finesse, most of them were caught within moments. Those that weren't found their fellows served as the wall they were meant to be, only this time to Keter's detriment.

"Slayers, begin," I called out in Crepuscular.

Acknowledged bloomed in the Night as the last of my skirmishers hurried through and armoured drow began sidling into Creation. All around me the hollow had become a nightmare made melee, deft drow dancing around clumsy corpses – many stuck to my miracle – and reaping death as they moved with fluid grace, slipping into shadows and striking with unnatural strength. I waited until two sigil-holders I'd decided on earlier came through, then finally set out.

"Krakovich, Prosij, with me," I ordered.

I limped towards the old village of Lauzon, the two of them trailing behind me without a thought to disobedience.

"Mighty Krakovich, I am told you know the Secret of Great Gales?"

"It is so, mighty one," the sigil-holder acknowledged.

"And you, Prosij, are reputed to hold the full suite of the Secrets of Ruin," I noted.

"A feat long in the making, Losara Queen," it proudly replied

Good. The Ruin Secrets were on the subtle side, compared to most Secrets, but I'd found them very useful – the trick that'd killed the Saint of Swords was derived from the Secret of Marching Ruin – against most conventional defences. There just wasn't a lot of sorcery using similar means, so most wards and enchantments didn't account for them.

"Good," I smiled. "Mighty Prosij, I want you to use the Secret of Ruinous Downfall on those stone houses."

I pointed at the warehouses Keter had raised from the old village, sidestepping a skeleton swinging a sword as I did and leaving Krakovich to absent-mindedly slap its head off. Its fingers trailed down the bare spine after, and there was a soft touch of power as Night was stolen from the corpse and added to its own. Prosij looked pained, as if it wanted to contradict me but did not dare.

"There are too many, Losara Queen, and the sum is too large," Prosij finally hazarded. "It will not be a success."

"It's not meant to," I grunted. "Krakovich, be ready to call on the Gales soon."

Mighty Prosij, either reassured or wary of arguing further, heeded my command. Biting deep into its own thumb it drew intricate patterns on its bare arm, the Night shivering in them, and only then did it begin to call on the Secret – a stabilizer, the patterns, as the Ruinous Downfall was particularly difficult to maintain. It was based on the principle of entropy, like most Secrets of Ruin, but this particular one had a vicious bent: it went for the weakest part of what it meant to unmake and poured the curse there. In people, that usually meant bursting eyes or the brain, but anyone with Night could fight the curse off so it was usually used on artefacts or structures instead.

When it got unleashed on a dozen stone warehouses instead, it proved thin. Weakened. Which didn't matter because I'd never meant for the Secret to actually break the stone: what it did,

what I'd wanted it to do, was find the weak parts of the buildings and then attack them. Sorcery immediately flared as the defensive wards laid into the stonework by Keteran mages protected the structure, neatly informing me of both the strength of the enemy's defences and where the weak points were. Masego much admired the Dead King's wardwork, as it was reactive instead of uniform – it concentrated power where the strike was made instead of leaving it spread out.

This once, though, for someone who could smell out the sorcery it was like shining a light on the weaknesses.

"Keep it going," I ordered, and let loose the Night.

Veins writhing with power, I grit my teeth and went about it methodically. Shaping a great spike of Night, angrily roiling power, I rammed the strike straight into the weakness of the ward. The warehouse blew as if struck by the hand of an angry god, clouds of a disgusting green miasma erupting as a plume.

"Krakovich," I snarled, already shaping a second spike.

The Secret of Great Gales were meant to shred entire warbands approaching through tunnels, but it wasn't the force I'd been after when I'd chosen someone who could use it – it was the size. Correctly divining my intent, Mighty Krakovich drew the cloud of poison that would have spread across the hollow and guided it up into the sky where it could not massacre my entire raiding force. The Dead King did like his poisons, and he would have made sure to keep those both close to the front and under a roof, where the containers would not be damaged by the elements. We went about it in good order, smashing one warehouse after another.

By the last one Krakovich was panting heavily and Prosij looked about to pass out, but we'd left only rubble and poisoned sky where Keter's poisonous munitions had been held. That alone would make the raid worth it.

"Well done," I said. "Retreat to your sigils. This is about to get a great deal more unpleasant."

How many dead had there been in the hollow when we'd first come? A thousand, I figured, maybe two. Not as much as could have been placed here, even though it was a significant amount. By now most the last waves of my raiders were almost done coming through and we'd effectively taken the hollow, though of course trying to keep it would have been madness. We were a cork on a river, not a dam, and Firstborn were not good defensive fighters. The last few holdouts of the dead were heavies, pockets of a few dozens being taken apart by lesser Mighty and drained of Night, but I knew better than to think this a victory. There had been no constructs here, no Revenants. We'd not been contested, and though the poison had been a loss for Keter it wasn't a major one – if they

truly had a Crab close, then not only would they have replacements but they could likely *make* more. It'd been bait.

Lauzon's Hollow was defending itself too poorly. Mighty Soln would be hitting the positions ahead of us by now and Mighty Sudone be sowing chaos near the enemy camp, but that wasn't enough to excuse the poor performance of Keter tonight. It'd all make sense if we had taken them by surprise, but they had to have known a retaliatory strike by the Firstborn after dusk was a possibility. Were this the first year of the war, I might have been on the enemy miscalculating and believing that Ivah's ten thousand out in the lowlands were all the drow there were on our side. I knew better by now, though.

When Neshamah made mistakes – and he did, like everybody else, for brilliance was not omniscience – it didn't look like this. This was a trap. One I'd caught in advance and entered willingly, with an eye to the escape, but it would have been a dangerous delusion to believe we actually had the upper hand right now. Making my way back towards the heart of the hollow, where Julianne's Highway passed, I idly flicked a hand over my shoulder. The western scaffolding went up in black flames, and with a sharp twist of will I subjected the eastern to the same. Petty vandalism, but sometimes it was the little things that made life sufferable.

"Spread out," I called out. "Prepare for assaults from the front and back."

Skirmishers took the front on both sides, heavier sigils setting up behind them, but I did not supervise – with Firstborn, doing so was often more harmful than helpful. I pulled at Mighty Ogoviz and Darissim through the Night, called them to me. I did not waste time with courtesies when they rose from shadow.

"There are engines of war up on the hills to the east and the west," I said. "Go there, and learn of them. Destroy the Enemy's work if you can."

I dismissed them curtly, and in silence they melded back into the shadows. I doubted the Dead King would leave those as unprotected as they looked, but it was worth a try. And if it went bad, as I suspected it might, those two sigils were known as being rather quick on their feet. Unlike with humans, the drow conception of honour in no way precluded running away when the opposition was stronger than expected. Safely at the heart of the milling sigils, I wove myself a few protective workings in Night – an illusion, a sharpening of my senses and a trip ward – and straightened my back. It wouldn't be long now, I figured.

Above, on the hills, the two sigils I'd sent ran into what sounded like entrenched defences. There was fire and light, sorcery as well as clash of arms. And still I waited, almost with

baited breath. Ogoviz retreated from the western heights, going down the heights as shadow strands with most of the force it had taken up there, when finally Keter closed its trap. With a bone-shaking hum, wards went up over all of us. Idly, already knowing the outcome, I tried to open a gate into the Twilight Ways and found a lock had been placed over the area.

"The first part," I mildly said. "Now for the second, King of Death."

As if called forth by my words, two hulking shapes rose from where they had been lying among the hills. With horrid roars, the great undead dragon creatures we called wyrms spread their wings as their eyes glowed with eerie power. There was a great clamour as the drow who had gone up to the other heights fled in disarray, a tall silhouette in armour standing over the edge and bringing up a bloody head. Mighty Darissim, I recognized. *Revenant*. I cracked my neck to the side and grinned. Good, Keter had finally played its hand.

Now the fun could begin.

Chapter 57: Battery

"Fear not defeat, for defeat is the mother of learning. Many a time will you be asked this question: are you worthy? Many a time will you have to deny it, until at last you do not."

– Extract from the Tenets Under the Night, Book of Losara

Mighty Brezlej, I spoke into the Night, begin.

Brezlej Hundred-Eyes was an oddity by Firstborn standards. Most sigil-holders prioritized obtaining fighting Secrets, but Brezlej had instead begun picking up sight-related suites as far back as when it'd been ispe. It had since survived not by being slaying all its rivals but by dint of the unnaturally good timing those Secrets leant it. Its sigil had been shaped in the same image, sharp but fragile and relying heavily on its keen perception. What I wanted from Brezlej was not one its more famous tricks, like the Farsight or the Nine Pridnis Foretelling, but instead one that'd been considered near useless back in the Everdark. The Source-Finder, it was called, and up in the Burning Lands it had found a use at last.

Mighty Brezlej signaled agreement and submission, and I dismissed the matter from my mind. It would reach out to me when it had results and the other two sigil holders I'd hand-picked would hang back until the preliminaries were done. Now, stuck under ward with our backs to the wall, was the time to make asplash.

"SA VREDE?" I asked in a roar.

Are you worthy? The gospel I had first passed on to the Firstborn under twilight glow, long grown into something greater than the sum of my words. It might have been my lips that spoke it then, spoke it now, but the words did not belong to me. They belonged to the grey-skinned silhouettes standing in the dark of Lauzon's Hollow, those fresh faces bedecked with ancient glories come to wage a war against Death tonight. And they answered, for I'd given them the first half of the prayer but the second was of their making.

"CERA AINE!"

The nuances bloomed in the Night: shame, fond amusement, hard-toothed pride and grim determination.

Are you worthy? I had asked them.

Ask tomorrow, they replied.

An oath, a threat, a boast. They were not yet worthy, but the night was young. I did not often like them, these strange and vicious souls that cruel goddesses had placed in my hands, but there were times where I could not help but love them. How could I not, when I had spent my life taking in lost souls and broken things as my own? Perhaps it was that the Crows had seen in me when they stole me back from the brink, that I would not be able to use them without coming to care for them. Even the worst of Firstborn was beautiful in its own way, and when time came for another to stand as first under the Night I would not part with the mantle embittered from my years under it.

The drow had screamed their defiance into the starlit sky but it could not answer. The Hidden Horror *did*, with fury and crawling madness.

With a deafening crack the sides of the hills broke open in showers of stone, horrors crawling out with ear-splitting shrieks. Above us the stars were blotted out by great wings as the wyrms roared, spewing out clouds of poison onto my raiders as the great war engines atop the hills began to ponderously turn towards us. Over the edges tides of undead were unleashed, leaping down into the hollow – ghouls and skeletons and mages lit in ghostly green, spells already aflight. Among them a handful of silhouettes stood tall, Revenants clad in faded things and awaiting to unleash old horrors. The head of Mighty Darissim was thrown into the throng, leering in death, even as the first strike of the drum was heard.

Deep, slow and unrelenting it shivered through the air. Sorcery flared. *Doom*, the faraway drum promised. *Doom*. And through the sound fear and fatigue slipped into the ears of all who heard,

sorcery just as poisonous as what boiled within the belly of the wyrms. Sve Noc stirred in the distance, ever jealous of the souls of their flock.

"You'll have to do better than that, King of Death," I laughed, Night gathering to me like rivers to the sea. "Let me remind you which of us it was, old bones, who once reigned over the night."

I had no use for subtlety, not when I was *making a point*, so it was an arrow of screaming Night that shot up towards that insolently-close wyrm above me – it spun as it shot up, siphoning ever more Night from my veins as Komena's harsh glee howled against my ear, and the abomination screamed when it pierced its belly. The Night did not fade after, staying a solid length rising straight from the tip of my staff to dozens of feet above the dead thing. Poison oozed down the length of the spike as I shifted my footing, grunting with effort even as a second hand came on my staff and Night surged through my limbs.

With a savage whoop, I slammed the dead dragon into one of the western engine turning towards us.

The belly burst open, unleashing a tide of steaming poison, and though the thing was not destroyed I had shredded its wings and body with the fall. I let go of the Night, gasping, and watched as pillars of wind turned back the cloud of death that'd come for my raiders. Eagerly, a whirling storm of obsidian and steel met the walking dead. I glimpsed only parts of the maddened melee, the nightmare suddenly turned real. Rylleh and sigil-holders split apart Tusks even as they trampled dzulu with impunity, ispe flickered from shadow to shadow as they danced the blades with sharp-fanged ghouls, javelins ripped through ornate breastplates as sorcery and Night traded deadly volleys.

Night had fallen, but there was light enough one would have been forgiven for believing otherwise.

There would be no gate into Twilight to take me up to the heights above, but then I had other ways. I whistled, with a flick of the wrist unleashing a rolling ball of blackflame that tore a hole through a tightly-packed shieldwall of armoured dead giving trouble to the Vuraga dzulu, and lightened the pain on my leg so that I might leap when Zombie passed by my side at a gallop and took flight again. Settling into the saddle I unsheathed my sword and savoured the ring of well-crafted goblin steel. With my knees alone I led her to take me to the eastern heights, where the Revenant that'd slain Mighty Darissim still stood, and my mount's long wings flapped as she hoisted us upwards in a spiral. Striking at the wyrm had dispersed my protective illusion, but it was not with surprise that I greeted the enemy's first volley. I'd been well aware it was coming.

Ghostly green flames flew at me in winding streaks, following even as Zombie dipped and twirled, while javelins and arrows came in swarms. Were I tired, were I spent, these could have been a threat. I was neither, for the night was yet young, and so I crushed them head on. Their dead flame I drowned out with my own, and no arrow was so well-crafted that it would not turn to ash when swallowed by blackflame. We came down on the enemy in a storm of fire, my mount whinnying with glee at the sight of the mayhem, and as her hooves touched the rock a circle of dead-become-ash burned around us.

"Come out, Revenant," I idly called out. "That won't have been enough to destroy you."

The noise was soft, under the roar of flames, but not so soft I did not catch it – eyes flicking to the side, I saw the spinning throwing axe about to bury itself in my chest. Swallowing a curse I leaned back and swatted at it with my staff, narrowly landing the blow. But I was looking the wrong way, as a flicker at the edge of my field of vision told me: the Revenant was coming from the other side. Zombie kicked at the enemy but I saw an axe come down and go straight through her leg. *Shit*, I thought, throwing myself down so she could flee. The Revenant was quicker than her. I glimpsed a blur of pale plate and then a large two-handed axe as it went down her back, splitting her in two.

"No," I screamed, Night already at my fingertips.

I lashed out with darts of shadow but the Revenant met my eyes for a heartbeat – a pale brown, somehow sympathetic – and stomped down into the ash. The erupting cloud covered his retreat, leaving me with the horrible slight of Zombie cleaved in half. The pieces fell, after a moment, with sickening lurch. Destroyed beyond repair, whatever light there'd been in her eyes gone from a single stroke. Swallowing the grief I'd not expected to come, I laid a hand on her flesh and dragged the remains into the Night. I could dispose of the flesh properly, at least. There was no time for more, as another muted woosh tipped me off the enemy was after me again.

This time I ducked below the throwing axe, sharpening my senses further so I might hear from where the Revenant would come. *Left*, I thought, and lashed out with Night. A ghoul went up in black flames, then I caught sound from the right and burned up another. I was being toyed with. It was only luck that let me catch a glimpse of moonlight on steel and realize that, utterly silent, the Revenant had somehow gotten behind my back and was leaping towards me. A working would be too slow, I thought. Night burned in my arm as I twisted around and met that great axe with my sword and staff, being forced back as pain burned white-hot in my bad leg.

The Revenant withdrew his axe and I struck, sword flicking out, but even with Night along the edge the steel found no purchase in the plate. It'd been bait, and when I blocked the following blow with my staff – spell-forged steel or not, the Revenant's blade bit not a whisper into the dead yew I'd been gifted in the depths of Liesse – I gave under his strength, stuck on the defensive long enough for him to take off a hand and sock me in the stomach. I spat out blood as a rib broke with a sharp snap, giving ground as I fled backward and flicked off the Night on the edge of my sword at the Revenant in the form of black flame. That white plate, though, was not so much as darkened by the heat of it. Dangerously well-crafted.

"Who were you?" I gasped out.

"Adehard Barthen," the Revenant replied in stilted Chantant, his voice deep and pleasant. "Once the White Knight, now a hound to the Enemy. Run while you still can, Callowan."

A White Knight using an axe? Hells, an *Alamans* using an axe? He must have been quite the odd duck.

"Not in the cards," I rasped.

The hand taken off the great axe reach behind his back. Another throwing axe, I decided, and threw up a quick gale of wind. But there was a flare of sorcery and it was another great axe that was revealed, one in each hand as he sped towards me. I shaped a tendril of Night and sunk it into the ground right before him, then detonated. He leapt up, just in time for my staff to smash his armoured stomach and forced him back to the ground. I swallowed a scream, my broken rib digging deeper into my flesh.

I struck out with my sword, looking for a weak point closer to the knee – if I found flesh, I could burn him inside out while avoiding the enchanted plate..

An axe came down to force aside my blade, goblin steel stubbornly matching Keteran spellcraft, and he swiftly pivoted on himself with his axe spinning with him and aimed for my throat. Gods but he was quick for a man his size. I formed a tendril of Night, curling around my own abdomen and had it drag me out of the axe's swing faster than I could move, then hammered his helmeted head with the tip of my staff: Night blew up in a heated detonation, but while the helm shook from the impact Sve Noc's power did not bite into the steel as it should have. Fuck me, but this one was a hard nut to crack. I stole the pain out of my rib, as it was getting too much to bear.

Completion sounded a clarion call into the Night: Mighty Brezlej was done. And it had answers for me.

Though I itched to continue the fight with this strange White Knight who'd already cost me too much, I'd not come here for

revenge or a pissing match. My staff struck the ground in front of me, smoke billowing out, and even as a great axe went spinning through where I'd been a heartbeat earlier I weaved an illusion around myself. Lesser undead came flooding the edge of the broken hill, as if answering the Revenant's call, but I was just one limping step ahead. I skipped off the edge, calling Night to myself. Tendrils of darkness rose from the ground, forming into a flat bar I landed on and then stairs I strolled down as the workings of Mighty covered my back from the shots of the undead.

Mighty Brezlej knelt as I approached, so unusually short and stout for one of the Firstborn – I'd not seen many who could be called fat, though Brezlej fell well short of that – and its gaudy golden trinkets dangled on their strings.

"We have found three sources, Losara Queen," Brezlej said. "I offer these sights to you."

It offered up its palm, a small sphere of Night atop it. With a nod of thanks I took the sphere in hand and crushed it. My vision wavered as the memories I'd been given settled into my mind. It took me a few heartbeats to place the three ward anchors Mighty Brezlej and its sigil had found. One in the enemy's camp proper, beyond the pass – I sunk that memory into the Night and passed it to Mighty Sudone, along with the curt order of *destroy* – and another closer to the front, close to where Lord Soln was fighting. Its raiders were actually in the memory, getting the worse end of a tumble with ghouls and beorns. I passed along an order to break that anchor as well, Soln replying with a sense of acknowledgement.

"You believe the third anchor is the key one," I noted.

"It is the source of sources," Mighty Brezlej agreed.

And it was the one closest to me: not far beyond the hollow, into the winding pass and tucked away behind secondary wards obscuring what defended the anchor. It had trap written all over it, but it needed to be sprung anyway. Fortunately, I'd already handpicked –

"No you fucking don't," I snarled.

The wyrm I'd downed had been patched together by necromancers just enough to start moving around again, and now instead of massacring anything daring to climb its hilltop it was getting back on its feet and preparing to bound down into the hollow. There its weight alone would kill hundreds if not thousands of my warriors before it was itself ripped apart by the Mighty. Above us the other wyrm made a pass, spewing clouds of poison and tying up Mighty with defending against them. Too many for comfort, every one of those wasn't handling more mundane javelin volleys killing the dzulu.

The poison will win, in the long term, the cold voice in the back of my head assessed as Night raced through my veins. The gales were not dispersing the clouds, just pushing them higher. Already a dome of death was beginning to form above the hollow. The thoughts had flickered as my will shaped Night, weaving it into a cable stronger than steel. Without asking I snatched a javelin from Brezlej's back and bound the working to it before sheathing my sword and leaving my staff to stand unnaturally still. The downed wyrm was not a difficult target, so strength without skill was enough to have the barbed javelin sink into its side.

The cable went from before me to the wyrm, protruding from a rippling sphere of Night, but I wasn't intending for a repeat of the last time. I ripped out the other end of the cable from the sphere, spinning it out and adding a hook to the end. The downed wyrm leapt, after having batted ineffectually at the cable and found it would bend but not break, but I was swifter still: the other wyrm was making it pass and the hook clipped its belly. Both wyrms roared with dismay as the cable pulled taut, forcing the flying dragon into a fall and snatching the leaping one before it could land atop my warriors.

They both fell on hillsides out of sight, writhing angrily, and without batting an eye I wove a fresh cable and tied it halfway through their shared binding. The other side of that fresh cable I tied to a javelin – offered up solemnly by Brezlej – and with a snap threw it at the hulking shape of Keter's untouched siege engine on the eastern heights. A hard smile stretched my lips as I felt the steel bite into something solid and the Night sink roots, just in time for the wyrms to try to peel away: one went back up in the air, the other circled west to return to the hollow. Both pulled at the second circle with massive strength. With a thunderous crack the engine was pulled up, and it was with pleased chuckle I saw that the base of the platform had been fused into the rock. The wyrms cracked the hill open like an egg, undead falling below as part of a rain of rock.

That ought to slow the enemy down some.

A tide of dust washed over us and I pulled my hood down, calling Mighty Randebog and Mighty Kuresnik to my side. In the distance I felt an anchor break. Mighty Sudone's work, and not its only doing by the rising columns of smoke in the distance. The ward cutting us off from the Ways thinned, especially around where the anchor had been, but it did not break. Most likely it wouldn't until the main anchor lay shattered.

"Brezlej," I mildly said. "You have tactical command until I return. Aim the Mighty to keep back the poison-cloud and make the wyrms trash everything you can."

"Chno Sve Noc," Mighty Brezlej fervently swore.

Randebog was a stately one, wearing a black cloth mask going down to its lips. The yellow cape on its back somehow accentuated the tall silhouette bedecked in boiled leather painted black, and it bore a long curved sword at its hip. Kuresnik was the opposite, if anything: though just as tall, save for its dyed green hair it wore not a thing above the waist. It'd similarly eschewed boots and wore only a skirt of long metal-tipped leather strips as clothing. It had a wild look to it and its vivid green sigil was tattooed on its face, mixing with intricate tattoos of the same hue covering most of its grey-skinned body.

"Open your minds," I ordered.

With restraint but not gently, I pushed into them the sight Brezlej had shared with me: the main anchor, nestled in the pass and awaiting our destruction. Both drow shivered as the sensation, as the Night that I wielded came straight from Sve Noc and apparently felt... purer than most. Raw.

"Kuresnik?" I asked.

It clenched its jaw, as if straining.

"I can take us close, Losara Queen," Mighty Kuresnik eventually agreed. "But not there directly. There is a boundary."

Around us their sigils had been gathering, still fresh and eager from having been kept in reserve all this time. Maybe seven hundred in total, most of them Kuresnik – their sigil was one of the most numerous in my army – though their lot was admittedly thinner on Mighty. The Randebog had never been many and their chosen specialty had not learnt itself well to thriving in the war, but their core of twenty one Mighty were what I'd been after all along.

"Do it," I bluntly ordered.

Mighty Kuresnik slammed the butt of its long barbed spear into the ground, Night rippling out, and a heartbeat later its sigil followed suit. Kuresnik, that bold soul, had taken to the new ways with great relish: it was the first of my sigil-holders to have ever taken a Secret it owned and taught it to its own, spreading it around until its entire sigil could use the Secret of Long Strides. Not all Kuresnik were able to use it properly, but enough minds had pondered the matter that while trying to make the Secret easier to use they'd ended up making another entirely. The Secret of the Shadow Road, as they called it, was more or less a communal version of the Long Strides – one that could, with sufficient numbers, be extended to cover people who did not know either Secret.

To my eye it looked like a mirror made of darkness was opened in front of me, and after a wary glance I limped through. A tunnel,

I thought, one in which I stood alone. The dark silently roiled around me, swallowing up all sound, but I could glimpse a patch of night at the end of the tunnel that was lighter in shade. It felt like I'd walked for an hour when I strode through the waiting dark mirror at the end, but my sixth sense told me that dawn was barely any closer – mere moments had passed. And still I now stood among a throng of drow, mostly Kuresnik, while ghostly fire rained down from above and sorcery crackled angrily in the air.

"Forward," I bellowed in Crepuscular.

"Cera aine," they shouted back.

The Dead King had known we were coming, and so made this place into a killing ground. The bend in the pass had been turned into a bastion, eight sets of increasingly tall and thick ramparts with the last reaching the height of the surrounding hills. Ghouls screeched as they leapt into the charging Kuresnik, claws and barbed spears tangling savagely, and knots of Bind mages scorched the air with their eerie flames from behind the safety of skeletons so heavily armoured they boasted more steel than bone. Lizards, rare among constructs, lay on their bellies atop the ramparts and spat goutts of flame and poisonous smoke. It was a tide of death, but it was met with vicious valour.

Shaping Night into a great spike, I hammered at the ramparts even as the Randebog began to emerge from the Shadow Road. The walls shook, but they had been warded up to the gills: I turned undead to ash but did not shatter stone. We'd have to do this the hard way. This was an ambush in more ways than one, of course. My Firstborn had emerged just outside the bend, scything through the few dead on the road and immediately turned against the heavily fortified bastion, but Julianne's Highway continued towards the enemy camp. Reinforcements poured in so swiftly they couldn't even be called that.

A wedge of Tusks, those great boar-like abominations with bellies full of stone, took the vanguard but behind them a flood of Binds and Bones was coming at a run. On the heights above, to the east, I caught sight of a silhouette in pale plate. Mounted atop a horse entirely of bone, now, but there was no mistaking that great axe. The Revenant who had once been the White Knight bellowed no war cry as he led his mount to skip off the edge of the hills, lesser undead trailing in his wake.

"You again," I coldly said.

This might have been trouble, were I a fool. Mighty Randebog answered my summons, having been close and waiting.

"Randebog," I hissed, *"now."*

It nodded, its Mighty gathering around it to lend power.

"I am the curate of forgery," Mighty Randebog prayed, voice clear and beautiful. "I bear empty sacraments and offer neither rise nor fall, only the bitter deception of the road winding ever round. Hallow me, Sve Noc, and so permit me to share your gloom with all the world."

The dead knight raised his axe, sensing the power, but it was too late. Before the hooves could touch the ground, darkness billowed out from Mighty Randebog in a great ring. It swallowed whole the Revenant and the tip of the coming reinforcements, before coming at a sudden halt. Within the ring, only my force and the enemy bastion could be seen. No one else would intervene so long as the Secret of the Lesser Gloom held sway over these grounds: round and round our enemies would go, finding nothing but where they had come from. *Now, I thought, all that's left is smashing that fucking bastion to pieces.*

I felt triumph in the Night and the wards shivered: Lord Soln had destroyed its own anchor. All on us, then.

Some mageling tossed a fireball at me, curving it past my warriors, and I casually swatted it aside as I took in the sight of the assault unfolding. Normally I'd consider sending light foot into a dug-in position to be throwing away lives stupidly, but the Kuresnik were a different story – nimble as wasps, they flitted from place to place in no way impeded by the heights and the walls. Already they'd swarmed through the first two walls, but looking at the meat grinder that ensued I wondered if that might not be by design: the third rampart was further back than the others, giving a clear line of sight, and the dead took full advantage of that.

With heavies out in the front and some sort of ward stunning the drow when they went up as shadows, the third rampart was proving the cliff to the sea of the Kuresnik. They won footholds, but did not keep them long. How many had died already? A third of the force at least. Lucky for them I'd come along.

"Randebog dzulu, with me," I shouted.

Even as I limped to the front of the offensive, drow parting smoothly for me, the enemy began to focus their fire on me. Ghostflame and curses, javelins and arrows and stones. I raised my staff, pointing it forward, and wove Night as a vortex of wind sucking in the deadly rain. Within moments the winds were howling with fire and steel, burning bright, and with a grunt of exertion I shaped the wind into a sphere and smashed it down on the third rampart. Sorcery and hot steel erupted, carving a hole in the enemy's defences, while I dragged myself up to the first rampart with Night tendrils and the dzulu followed with nimble leaps.

The dark filled with nightmarish visions that came almost too quick for me to react. A ghoul fell on me from above and I unsheathed my sword just in time to carve through it, staff coming forward to send a streak of blackflame into some Bind's leering skull before it could tighten a curse of decay around my throat. The Kuresnik surged forward in the hole I'd blown from them, one even smashing the wardstone that'd been giving them trouble, just in time for the enemy to toss down great pillars of rock. I would have laughed at the absurd mundanity of that tactic, but Neshamah didn't *do* mundane.

To the utter surprise of the Firstborn, Night wavered around the pillars – now shining with runes – and those that tried to escape into shadow instead of dodging were crushed. The third rampart, not even fully taken, became yet another killing floor.

Tentatively I chucked a spear of blackflame at the fifth rampart and found it became unstable just before hitting the enemy javelinmen perched there, though it still torched a few. There were more, then, and direct workings were doomed. I'd have to pull something heavy and risk the vulnerability. I called Mighty Kuresnik itself to me, signifying I was in need of a bodyguard, and let the Night roar inside the back of my head. I'd drawn heavily on my well, tonight, and though it was not empty – could not empty, not when the Sisters smiled on me as they did tonight – I was beginning to near the limit of what my body could tolerate using. It was time to wrap up this raid.

As if sensing my intent, Keter pulled out all the stops. Stones shifted and a terrible screech filled the air, swarms of insects emerging from the sixth rampart like a tide and descending. Distantly, I heard Kuresnik fending off arrows and worse. Swallowing a curse I adjusted the working I'd begun to weave on the fly, forced to adapt as the first ranks of dzulu were devoured alive and the Mighty began to torch swarms and drow alike with black flames of their own. A dark shape, vaguely rectangular, began to shimmer into being above the enemy. Sweat beaded my brow. A headache was already pounding at my temples: Merciless Gods but I *hated* shoving imperative properties into things.

I only had the barest understanding of them through my patronesses, so pulling on one of them always had that horrid bleed. Back when I'd been smoke and mirrors I was able to shrug that off, but these days I was at a risk of my brain beginning to boil if I trifled too much with things beyond my understanding.

It worked, though. I'd pretty shamelessly stolen a favourite trick of Radhoste the Dreamer, the Sixth General, but with my own twist on it. Rhadoste like to make large miracles with magnetic properties, since it could foresee the enemy's approach and arm its own forces appropriately, but simple imitation wouldn't help

me with the swarms. So instead of a simple magnet, I'd leaned on the Sisters to allow to 'understand' a nameless property. It was, essentially, 'bodies with Night and bodies without Night'. As my miracle flared, the dead – ghouls, swarms, skeletons – were slammed against their own ramparts as a great force repelling all bodies without Night exerted its strength against them.

"Quick," I gasped. "Clear the ramparts, I won't last long."

It was all butcher's work after that, killing enemies that mostly couldn't fight back. The pillars that troubled Night were tossed aside with simple strength and the ways cleared as Mighty took the time to get inventive now that they were no longer being shot at. Acid and fire and curses that turned bone to dust lashed out, clearing one rampart after another as the dzulu advanced. I released my working as soon as we began storming the last bastion, spent and covered in sweat, and though there were a few last nasty surprises one of the Kuresnik eventually shattered the last anchor with a well-placed blow. The invisible weight went off our shoulders and I breathed out in relief. We'd lingered long enough, the swarms and Revenants couldn't be far by now. *Retreat*, I spoke into the Night, putting an end to our raid.

Bodies were picked up where we could, and within thirty breaths of my order there was not a living soul left in Lauzon's Hollow.

Chapter 58: Prophylaxis

"One can no more win a battle than one can 'win' a hurricane or a house fire. It can, at best, be a disaster withstood better than some others also suffering it."

– Dread Empress Sanguinara, the Shrewd

The blades had gone back to the sheaths, so as always the generals were left to the grim business of counting the corpses.

With the protective wards set down the rest of our army had crossed into Creation and a camp begun being built, but even so General Hune had prepared casualty reports by the time I returned. A little over nine hundred dead for the fight taking the beachhead, more from the Dominion than the Army of Callow. Significantly more wounded, but we weren't low on priests so that ought to be a temporary measure in most cases. Given that there was sure to be fighting tomorrow, our standard orders that mages would not currently offer advanced healing stood. Not too unexpectedly, the raid I'd led into Lauzon's Hollow had turned out more costly than the first battle of the day.

Almost twelve hundred drow had died on those grounds, Lord Soln's battle claiming the largest share of dead – it'd run into heavily

entrenched positions and waiting Revenants. A costly affair, losing more than a tenth of our current force of Firstborn on the first stroke, but the payoff had been worth it. We couldn't be sure of the enemy's casualty numbers but around six thousand at the hands of my raiders was a conservative estimate, and that was without taking into consideration the targeted objectives we'd gone after.

On wurm was destroyed entirely, stormed by a hunting pack of Mighty while I'd been gone, and one of the siege engines made essentially unusable. Soln had devastated the enemy's fortifications in the front and one of its sigil-holders slain a Revenant, while Sudone had done more damage than the two of us put together. Three ritual sites had gone up in flame along with the mages manning them before it found a fourth too well-fortified to assault and turned instead to setting fire to every structure in sight. It'd even collapsed the mouth of the pass leading out of the Hollow on its way out, which if nothing else ought to slow down the enemy's repairs overnight.

I sat down with Senior Mage Dastardly from the Third to get my rib seen to as I heard Hune's assessment of the situation in camp. We were building quickly but too fragile for her tastes, not that there was much of a choice. While Dominion folk and Procerans – the Volignac soldiers and the fantassins drew lots – could be put to work digging ditches, most couldn't be trusted to raise palisades or assemble watchtowers. It just wasn't the way either of their peoples waged war, they had no training in it. I called a war council after thanking Dastardly for his work, first to reiterate the watch arrangements – goblins and drow would take the first few shifts, but as soon as we had enough torches and magelights up the forces that'd not fought today would begin sending watchmen – but secondly to share what I'd learned during the raid.

"The surrounding hills have been hollowed out," I told them. "To what extent I can't be sure, but at the very least the valley where the village once lay is significantly larger now."

Meaning the enemy would be able to cram a lot more soldiers into it when we tried to break through.

"More worrying is this," I continued, pulling at Night.

I drew out the silhouette of the two siege engines I'd never quite gotten a look at.

"Larger than even goblin works, much less those of the dwarves," Princess Beatrice observed.

Spoken like someone who'd never seen an actual dwarven army on the march, I thought. The stuff they peddled up here was the dregs of their arsenals.

"What does it do?" Lady Aquiline more bluntly asked.

"I don't know," I admitted. "Neither fired, and they were slow in turning towards us. I'd wager they were being pointed at the grounds in front ahead of the Hollow and that the machines are slow to turn."

"Not surprising, given the size," General Abigail muttered. "Old Bones doesn't usually use this stuff either, Your Majesty, it's all monsters and spells. I don't like the looks of it at all."

Several people leaned forward as the Callowan general, famed for her sharp military instincts, expressing such wariness. They'd not been taking it all that seriously until now.

"Do we have a way to silence it before the assault?" Lord Razin asked.

"We can't take horses up those hills," Grandmaster Talbot said. "Gods know we tried, last year. We never found any proper paths for soldiers to go up, either."

"I intend to send Special Tribune Robber into the hills to see if there are paths to use," I said. "But I'll not pin great hopes on the attempt. The area will be swarming with undead, regardless: even Mighty in the fullness of night were unable to seize those positions."

I hadn't been able either, and lost Zombie in the process, but I wouldn't admit to that in front of these people. The myth of my unconquered strength was much too useful to begin chipping at now.

"It might be worth trying a second raid with the full strength of the Firstborn when the detachments return," Captain Reinald suggested.

"Playing the same trick on Keter twice always ends the same way," Razin Tanja firmly said.

Good boy, I thought. He was learning, our Lord of Malaga.

"The detachments will begin arriving tomorrow afternoon at the earliest," General Hune said. "And it would be ill-advised to attack before the following morning. We still have time to consider other methods."

"The Dead King won't wait until then to begin attacking," I said. "Don't rely entirely on the common watch, you should all keep your own as well. Tomorrow we'll begin bombardment of the entrance to prevent fortifications from being raised again, but in essence our position remains defensive. We are preparing for a decisive thrust, not spending our strength."

The trouble would be figuring out how to make our thrust decisive, I'd already gleaned. The Dead King had struck with all his might against Cleves in the west, betting that he could break through there before we could reclaim Hainaut, so he wouldn't be looking to outright win the battle here: just delaying us for too long would be victory enough. It was hard to dislodge a skilled enemy waiting you out in a fortified position like the Hollow even when they *weren't* outnumbering you, and attempting to force the pass would be bloody business. There would be a need for some cleverness here.

The only good news so far was that there was no hint our enemy had caught on to our reserve using the Twilight Ways to strike directly at the Cigelin Sisters, behind our current tussle. I was actually tempted to just trade artillery shots with the undead here until the Sisters were seized, actually, since their fall might force the enemy to move from the Hollow. That was just me getting squeamish about casualties, though, I suspected. At the moment time was more precious to us than soldiers, ugly as the truth was. I called the war council to an end shortly after, exhausted but not yet done with my duties.

I held back Princess Beatrice, since I had a question for her.

"Ever heard of a Chosen named Adehard Barthen?" I asked. "He would have been a White Knight."

"I have not, Your Majesty," Beatrice Volignac admitted. "Though history was never my strong suit. The name sounds northwestern but that might not mean much: the Principate is not a small realm."

"It was worth a try," I sighed. "Kindly ask around if you know anyone of such scholarly incline."

Might be worth sending word back to Neustal to see if Salia or the Arsenal could dig up anything for me. It'd been a while since I'd lost a fight that badly, and this White Revenant wasn't even supposed to be the main threat here: that would be the Prince of Bones and his Grey Legion, neither of which had yet made an appearance. Which was worrying me. The Headhunter had not been able to confirm their marks were still there, as I'd not risked Named too close to the enemy defences yet. The last fucking thing I needed was a fresh Revenant with knowledge of my war plans.

Hakram was in not long after, the Apprentice trailing his shadow as agreed. The Ashuran was young, and her face of a cast too hard for people to call it pretty. I sympathized, having been there myself at her age – only without magical powers to make up for it, unless you counted compulsive mouthing off as one. Adjutant came with a mug of hot tea – sweetened with honey – and reports I'd been wanting. I drank of the first, enjoying the warmth

seeping into my bruised lips, while gesturing for him to summarize the second.

"Start with the Rapacious Troubadour," I said.

"As ordered, the Vagrant Spear preserved a Bind and delivered it into our custody," Hakram gravelled. "The Troubadour then interrogated it in his particular manner."

"He means the Troubadour ate the soul and went sifting through its memories," I idly told the Apprentice.

"That is revolting," she said, wrinkling her nose.

I hummed in agreement.

"Damned useful, though," I said. "So, what did her get?"

"Confirmation that the Grey Legion and the Prince of Bones are here," Adjutant. "Eyes on at least twelve Revenants. He also believes, from the movement of troops glimpsed, that the Dead King has been waiting for our offensive."

I grimaced. Much as I hated to hear that, it fit what we'd seen: the strikes to the west into Cleves had come too quickly after the beginning of our offensive for it to be a coincidence. He'd waited until our armies were committed elsewhere to attack.

"Speaking of Revenants," I said, "I want you to look into a name: Adehard Barthen. White Knight, possibly from the northeast."

"I'll see what I can dig up," Hakram gravelled. "Difficult foe?"

"Couldn't crack him before I withdrew," I admitted. "And Zombie's gone."

He let out a soft noise of sadness.

"I'd begun to think that malevolent old thing was unkillable," Hakram said.

"So had I," I murmured.

I shook it off, sipping at my tea. This was no time to get sorry over a dead horse dying again, there was a war on.

"Firing platforms?" I asked.

"Pickler says they'll be ready by morning," Adjutant replied. "Our artillery will be in place by Early Bell at the latest, though come daylight she maintains her request for Named spotters."

"I'll think about it," I grunted.

I hated to use any Named like that, as it felt like using a magic wand as an arrow, but some of our less combat-ready contingent might be gainfully used that way. I wasn't going to be sending the Page out into the fray anytime soon, for example, so an argument could be made there.

"The trouble, sir," Apprentice reminded him.

"I had not forgotten," Adjutant replied, sounding somewhat amused.

He was in a much better mood than when I'd last seen him, I noticed, and I didn't even know why.

"The Blessed Artificer went to have a look at our wards," Hakram said. "Or tried to. Akua sent her packing, in her own polite way."

"The Artificer has threatened to lodge a complaint under the Terms," the Apprentice said. "It's been the talk of the Named in camp."

"Akua Sahelian is not Named, which makes that threat utterly meaningless," I replied, rolling my eyes. "And if the Artificer wanted a look at our wards, she should have sought permission from the appropriate officers first. This isn't the Arsenal."

"Don't I know it," Apprentice muttered under her breath.

I smothered my amusement. Evidently, while pragmatic about trading the assignment as Hakram's bodyguard and assistant for my backing in being reassigned to the Arsenal afterwards she wasn't quite as sanguine about the trade as she'd been pretending. I hardly minded, if anything it'd keep her motivated to ensure Adjutant made it through this in one piece. After downing the rest of my tea and dismissing the two of them, I crawled into my cot and tumbled straight into a mercifully dreamless sleep.

I woke up much too soon, one of the Night-workings I habitually lay around my tent having been tripped. When an attendant came into my tent moments later and I slipped back my knife under the pillow, it took his announcing of Scribe as the courtesy it was: the villainess would have been perfectly capable of coming in without tripping a damned thing, or being seen by my guards. The nights were cool enough I'd gone to bed in a shirt, which cut down on dressing time, but I'd not washed before sleeping so I was unlikely to be smelling of roses. Eh, she'd deal.

"I'" generously assume you woke me for good reason," I bluntly said, sliding into a seat.

"News from the west," Scribe replied. "From Princess Rozala."

I grimaced. Yeah, that was well shaving an hour off my bedrest for.

"Hit me," I sighed.

"You might recall that the diversionary force Princess Rozala sent out of Coudrent to pin the enemy army at Luciennerie was routed," Scribe said.

"Not before seeing the Dead King was on the march, though," I said. "I take it the siege of Coudrent has begun?"

"It has not," Scribe calmly corrected. "In fact, the last reports from outriders insist there is no trace at all of an offensive against Coudrent."

I blinked in surprise. Wait, what? It wasn't that a feint was impossible there – I could think of half a dozen ways it could be done without even using magic – but rather that if that one hundred and fifty thousand strong army wasn't headed west, where the Hells *was it*?

"Is it coming down the blue road instead?" I asked.

Vivienne was in for a ride, if that was the case. We had a stronghold straddling the blue road, north of Arbusans, but even with reinforcements holding it against such numbers was going to be rough. I frowned before Scribe even replied, already suspecting what the answer would be.

"There have been warbands, but no sign of an army," Eudokia said.

Less than three bells ago, I'd been convinced that the Dead King's plan had been to strike hard into Cleves while delaying us in Hainaut so that whatever gains we might make were made worthless by an entire front collapsing to our west. *But that only makes sense if he attacks along both lines*, I thought. Even if Trifelin fell right now – and it was by far a harder fortress to force than Coudrent at the moment, to boot – Cleves would be able to rally and mount a defence.

Which meant I had been gravely, utterly wrong about what Neshamah's campaign plan was.

"*Fuck*," I cursed. "We were had. I don't know *how* yet, but we were had."

Dragged into full wakefulness by dread, I turned a hard eye to Scribe.

"Wake up Adjutant," I said. "I want my full war council up and here within the hour."

The Scribe nodded, but did not immediately depart. My brow cocked with impatience, as I probably needed to get some pants on if I was going to be entertaining royalty. I had fond memories of doing otherwise, admittedly, but it was best left as a one-off.

"I hear you have been asking about an Adehard Barthen," Scribe said.

I gestured curtly for her to go on, since it was a rhetorical question we both knew the answer to.

"Though I cannot speak to this Adehard in particular, the House of Barthen is ancient Proceran royalty," Eudokia said.

"Unless I missed a name when I made myself memorize the Highest Assembly – and I did not – you mean ancient in a very literal sense," I noted.

"Relatively so," Scribe hedged. "It preceded the House of Goethal on the throne of Brus, but collapsed after the death of nearly all adults of the line in the Sixth Crusade. In the short-lived civil war that ensued, the Goethals seized power while having essentially no real claim to the throne save force."

Well, I thought, that was something.

"Anything related to them and a greataxe?" I asked.

It was an unusual enough weapon for an Alamans noble it was worth asking. She stilled a moment, as if deep in thought.

"The heraldry of House Barthen was a white axeman on green, wearing armour," Scribe finally said. "And their words translated roughly to 'None May Mar'."

My eyes narrowed. I'd not scored so much a single wound on the dead White Knight, had I? And my inability to damage his plate – mar it, so might say – might have a deeper source than simple sorcery.

"Talk with Hakram," I said. "Look into it together. Artefacts like a set of pale plate and a greataxe would be details of interest to me."

If I was going to be fighting this one again, I wanted all the knowledge I could on my side. Scribe took my words like the dismissal they were, leaving me to limp around looking for a clean pair of trousers and quickly wash myself of the worst of the dried sweat from the night's fighting. My hair went into a loose ponytail and I went looking through my desk's drawers for nuts and dried raisins, which while far from a meal would have to suffice until something more filling could be arranged. I

unrolled my maps of Hainaut on the carved table, setting down painted iron blocks for the forces once more.

I wasn't seeing the solution, and it was like an itch I couldn't scratch. I honestly couldn't make sense out of the Dead King's campaign plan here. The army here in Lauzon's Hollow to stop us made sense, no arguing with that, but the rest wasn't adding up. There were too many little details going against the grain. Like Prince Klaus' best efforts to bait out the army holed up in Juvelun failing even though at first his advance had been harassed quite aggressively, for one. The way that attack on Trifelin, which Princess Rozala had turned into a bloody fortress, had been obvious enough in coming we'd *known* it would for weeks if not months.

And not the supposed march on Coudrent turning out to have been a feint, which made some sort of sense, but less so that there'd apparently been *no follow-through*. Where had the army in Luciennerie gone? It should be hurrying down the blue road at breakneck pace right now, in an attempt to move quickly enough even through the Twilight Ways we'd be too late to reinforced. Instead an army of hundred and fifty thousand had disappeared. In principle, going into the countryside and off the roads it was possible to cut through the hills and reach Cigelin or the capital from Luciennerie.

In practice, that same lack of roads meant that the journey would be so slow that if my army broke through Lauzon's Hollow in the next three days we'd still get to the capital ahead of the Luciennerie reinforcements, and with time to spare. My host was capable of beating such a force on the field, especially from a fortified position like the walls of Hainaut. Would the army in Juvelun move to the Cigelin Sisters and try to slow us down there instead? *But that'd be throwing away another army*, I thought. Neshamah had bones to spare, but he wasn't exactly in a position to be pissing away armies like this either.

Honestly, even just taking Hainaut back up to the Cigelin Sisters while sealing the Malmedit tunnels out east and investing Luciennerie to the west would be a major victory for us. It wouldn't deal with the bridge up north, which would still need to be destroyed, but that could be attempted from our new fortified lines – which would include, for the first time since the beginning of the war, a shared frontline between Hainaut and Cleves through Luciennerie. That'd be bad fucking news for the Dead King, and this entire gamble did not seem like his kind of stratagem at all. Which meant I was still missing something.

It had to be about that force of two hundred thousand, the one still missing. It'd last been seen north of the capital, and obviously it wouldn't be able to move quickly when it was so large a force, but maybe it'd gone west? It might hit Trifelin,

still being besieged, as a second wave. Hells, it might even try to attack the shore elsewhere entirely by going through the bottom of the lake. I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them. No, I decided. That wasn't it. There'd be sense in that strategy – the Luciennerie army would then finally attack our defence lines after having delayed, forcing us to commit there and not reinforce Malanza – but that was, as the Intercessor had reproached me, still thinking like a general. Neshamah wasn't trying to win a war, not like we would.

He was trying to exterminate vermin.

Battles and strategic victories meant little to him, it was only the destruction of our forces that mattered. And he wasn't going to get that out west in Cleves, not when so many of the prominent Named and our finest armies were here in Hainaut and taking risks. The killing blow would come here, on this front. I could feel it in my bones, even if I still could not discern the shape of the doom to come. My war council filed in just as warm meals and steaming mugs of tea were brought in for everyone – Hakram's eye for detail had not failed me – and I filled them in as everyone dug in. Not everyone understood the trouble we were in, unfortunately.

"I'll not complain at fighting fewer enemies," Captain Reinald said. "Let the Princess of Aquitan turn them back from her nice, cozy fortresses."

"The dead will not grow wings, Black Queen," Lord Razin said. "We'll find this missing army sooner or later."

I eyed him with displeasure.

"Or they'll find *us*, Tanja," Lady Aquiline flatly said. "This is grim news."

Good girl, I fondly thought. She was learning, our Lady of Tartessos.

"In the worst case scenario," General Hune said, "the force that routed the raiders from Coudrent could have been a simple large detachment – fifteen or twenty thousand, enough for a full-scale assault to be inferred by scouts – while the rest was already marching east. They could already be closing in on the capital, or even the Cigelin Sisters."

I hadn't even considered that, in truth. I nodded appreciatively at the ogre, even though she'd made it plain we might be in more trouble than I'd thought.

"Word should be sent to the Iron Prince," Princess Beatrice suggested.

"It will be," I said, "but there's no guarantee the messengers will make it there, much less back to us with an answer. He'll be north of Juvelun and approaching Malmedit by now."

Meaning his back would be very much exposed, and the roads about as safe as having a drink in the Tower.

"No point in talking much about it, is there?" General Abigail shrugged. "Only one thing left to do."

I suppressed a grin at the sight of every eye in the room turning towards her. See, the thing about that little jewel of a find was that while she was deeply paranoid – a healthy survival trait, in the Army of Callow – and just a little on the side of cowardly, she was also a significantly better commander than she believed she was. Her trouble was, in essence that her points of comparison were the finest generals of our time. She had the stuff, though, the spark that meant you had the potential to be one of those. The War College couldn't teach you that, and while today Hune might be the better commander in every regard a decade from now I'd bet on Abigail of Summerholm nine times out of ten. Something like anguish struck the other woman's face when she realized that her conclusion had not, in fact, been obvious to everyone else in the room.

"Proceed, General Abigail," I drily said.

"If we can't figure out what the Dead King's up to, then we have to punch through as quick as possible," she hesitantly said. "Doesn't matter what his plan is, if we throw a sharper in the middle of it."

She'd put her finger to the pulse of it. Tempting as it might be not to act until we'd figured out what Neshamah was up to, it was too late for that. The armies were already marching, the bets had been put down. Now the only way out was through.

"My thoughts exactly," I agreed. "It has now become imperative to break through even before the reserve strikes at the Cigelin Sisters."

It'd allow us to secure the lands between the Hollow and the Sisters swiftly, and make sure the army holding Lauzon's Hollow was annihilated instead of dispersed. I had no intention of allowing chunks of it to break off after we won the field and cut our supply lines after we moved on. We'd bottle them up in the lands between the two armies and eradicate them before moving on the capital together.

"Prepare for battle," I ordered my war council. "As soon as the artillery is ready to begin firing, we will begin probing for a weakness to assault."

There was no arguing with that, so as soon as the meals were finished they returned to prepare their men. I'd been blunt with my commanders mostly for the sake of clarity, as hurried or not I did not intend to throw soldiers into the meat grinder of a straightforward assault of the Hollow. It had become undeniable, however, that we no longer had the time to be too sly about forcing out the enemy. I was left to rely on the possibility that my first leanings might have paid off, so when a bone-tired Robber returned to camp an hour after dawn I had him brought to me directly. Dusty and bloodied, he still came in with a swagger. It did not hold for long when I asked for a report, though.

"I've got something," Special Tribune Robber admitted. "But I'm not sure you'll like it, Boss."

"It beats the nothing I currently have on the table," I frankly replied. "Talk."

"There's no goat paths left," the goblin told me. "Keter got clever about it, broke up anything that might serve as a road soldiers could use coming from the outside. Went over the hills by climbing, but the place is full of ghouls and mages. I lost most of a line to some pretty well-hidden wards."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"Blew up the dead," he said. "Keter'll get no word out of my lot, even in death. It was the sharpers that let us find out what we did, actually. You mentioned the hills were hollowed out some, Boss, but it's a lot more than that. They made the sides of the pass into a massive cavern camp, I reckon."

I grimaced. I'd not thought that the Dead King would have invested so long in building up the Hollow, or that we would have missed it. Hells, with work of the scale he was mentioning the dead must have been at work even before we seized the pass last year. They'd hidden their tracks well, if even heroes had missed them.

"You can get in there?" I asked.

"Sure," Robber of the Rock Breaker Tribe grinned. "We know a thing or two about digging, goblins."

He elaborated further under my questioning. Having assessed that trying the hilltops any further would just get more of his people killed to no gain, he'd instead spent most of the night getting a sense of the lay of the structures under the hills. The malevolent imp had three points of ingress for me and a sketch of what he believed the lay of the artificial caverns might look like – a copy of which was already in Pickler's hands. Good, that'd spare me sending him to do that afterwards.

"Taking those would get real messy, Boss," Robber told me. "Legions don't do well on grounds like those, not against things like Tusks and Beorns. We need an open field for our mages to handle their like."

"I'm aware," I mused. "But if you're right, the enemy will have hidden a significant part of its army under the hills."

Waiting to surprise us after we'd taken the hollow, I decided. First they'd bleed us taking the entrance, and after we pushed the dead back beyond the old village they would have sprung the trap. The raid of last night paired with my favourite marauders had sniffed out the jaws, though, so we might be able to turn this on them. I drummed my fingers against the table, closing my eyes and forcing myself to think. The Dead King's army had a superior position, superior numbers and it'd been preparing for this fight for long enough it'd still have a few nasty surprises up its sleeves. What did my army have that could overturn all those advantages?

"Maybe they'll turn around and walk home, if we're lucky," Robber mused. "Stranger things have happened."

My eyes opened. That was an answer, yes. *Luck and goblins.*

Didn't sound like much, but you could do a lot of damage if you used those right.

Interlude: Old Dogs

*"I fear our tyrant in the east, but dread I reserve
alone for what staying on our knees would make of us."*

– Queen Eleanor Fairfax, founder of the Fairfax dynasty

General Abigail looked into the Baalite eye again, wishing generals didn't have to be on horses.

It made her stand out, and people who stood out did have that unfortunate tendency to get shot. She couldn't even use the damned thing to run away, because it made her stand out so people would bloody well notice. It was the sixth time since the Third Army had begun to mobilize that she was having a look at the enemy positions, but repetition wasn't improving her prospects any. The drow had done good work, smashing up the enemy's walls and collapsing their ditches, but the corpses had worked tirelessly overnight. The walls had been rebuilt into little more than stacked stones, more like a cattle-fence than a fortification, but the nice thing about cattle was that it wasn't usually trying to stab you.

Somehow she doubted the undead would be so congenial.

"At least they're low on bowmen," General Abigail muttered.
"Javelins aren't as bad when it gets down to it."

They did a number even on plate and they could scrap a shield, sure, but the range was lesser and you couldn't carry anywhere as many of them.

"I don't understand why Keter fields so few," Staff Tribune Krolem gravelled at her side. "With their numbers, mass volleys would be near impossible to deal with."

Except with them mage shields, of course, but those would be needed for the more exotic stuff the enemy had up its sleeves.

"Their dead are too dumb," Abigail absent-mindedly told him. "The Binds, the one with souls still nailed to the corpse, they're as clever as people. But the Bones? They can't maintain gear for shit, certainly not something as finicky as a good bow. Javelins are simpler, and easier to make too."

She glanced at her right hand, the tall orc looking like he was spoiling for a fight. It wasn't his fault, Abigail reminded herself. Orcs were just born that way, with more teeth to compensate for the absence of the part where good sense went. Besides she'd probably like fighting more if she got to eat the losers afterwards, she figured. Tavern rates these days were basically robbery, so greenskins were definitely coming out ahead there.

"We'll wait until the Sapper-General finishes her bombardment to advance," she told Krolem. "And send our bloodhounds out, would you? I want this field cleaned up before our shield wall starts advancing."

"On it," the Staff Tribune saluted.

Good man. Some would have called Abigail paranoid for the precaution, but they couldn't. Largely on account of them all being fucking dead while she was not. A nice empty field all the way to Lauzon's Hollow, after Keter was allowed time to work its wickedness? Yeah, she wasn't falling for that one. Her 'bloodhounds' were a suggestion she'd made to the Black Queen last year that got approved, to her surprise: mixed crews of regulars, priests and lesser magical talents that could sniff out the kind of hidden devilries the Dead King liked to leave lying around *before* her people walked into them. Leaving them to do their work properly would slow the advance, but Abigail didn't exactly mind. She looked into the Baalite eye again, silently bemoaning her fate.

While it'd been a relief to learn that the Black Queen's battle plan wouldn't require the Third to charge at the mouth of Lauzon's Hollow under enemy fire, she'd still ended up stuck

leading the vanguard. Her inexplicably enthusiastic soldiers might think it was an honour to serve as the foremost meat shields – *Dauntless*, they'd all cheered, like the word meant they were no longer the people standing closest to swords trying to kill them – but General Abigail was not fooled. When you tangled with Keter, the front was the last damned place you wanted to be. Nowhere near was her own preferred locale, but she'd not had a great deal of success getting there.

Gloomily, the general leaned back on horse as the wings of the assault assembled to the east and west. The Second Army under General Hune would stay behind her and serve as both the reserve and the escort for the siege engines, while to the left the Procerans had assembled under Princess Beatrice and to the right the two leading members of the Blood had been granted a shared command. It made the west the weak flank, not as steady or numerous, but the Black Queen had sent most of the alliance's horse there to prop them up. It would be some time yet before they had to advance, General Abigail knew, and when they did she'd at least have Named with her.

It was still with despair that she realized they'd somehow got her again.

She'd had a plan, a solid one. It was too late to back out of this whole general business now, as a pragmatic soul she'd been forced to recognize as much. Besides, Abigail of Summerholm hadn't stuck out this bloody nightmare of a war to *not* retire with a full general's pension: when she got home, she fully intended to never lift a finger again for the rest of her days and maybe drink herself into an early grave. It was her *godsdamned godsgiven right to do so*. So the plan had been adjusted. Abigail was going to make herself just enough of an embarrassment that they'd reassign her back home where she couldn't make the Black Queen look bad in front of all the fancy nobles by being a lout.

It would be a delicate line to walk, being embarrassing enough to be sent away but not enough to be demoted, yet as the daughter of a long and storied line of loutish drunks Abigail had trusted in her blood to get her through this. It, uh, hadn't panned out quite how she'd expected. People kept laughing when she said terrible things like 'sure the Dead King horrid, but in his defence he's been stuck living next to Procer for centuries' and 'makes sense the lake by the Dominion is from a hole in the ground, that's pretty much the rest of the country too' and instead of being made of pariah the amount of invitation to parties had tripled.

She'd dug deeper into loutishness, trying things like saying 'you people' and repeating the filthiest stories you could hear living

in Summerholm as a brewer's daughter, but it turned out these fancy Procer folk were shocking hard to, well, shock.

The only upside had been that these days Abigail might have to worry about nooses and the Black Queen eating her soul, but at least she didn't often have to worry about being stabbed! Best thing about being a general was that when you got to a nice safe spot away from the frontlines, you got to call it *strategizing*. Very fond of strategizing, Abigail was. She did as much of it as was humanly possible. But now, as the Third Army spread out on the plains before Lauzon's Hollow, the dark-haired woman finally understood the final treachery of her rank: even if she stood at the back of her army, that army could still be made to stand at the front of the coalition. She'd been had again.

The general looked into the Baalite eye again and sighed. It really was a shame about the horse, she thought. They might not have noticed her slipping away otherwise.

—

Though Robber had been told that his assignment was to serve as Pickler's bodyguard, he suspected that what he'd actually been sent here to do was make sure that the Sapper-General of Callow did not end up murdering her assigned spotter: the honourable young lord Gaetan Rocroy of Cantal, also known as the Page. Robber admired the young man in a deep and sincere manner, which he'd not hid in the slightest. It'd taken him *years* of work to be able to get under the skin of everyone he met, while the boy was pushing through on natural talent alone. It was a wonder to behold, really.

"Praesi measurements are quite inadequate," the Page blithely said. "Outdated, even. It is the Salian *paume* that should be used, not the—"

Sergeant Snorer, who had been a sapper for more than decade, twitched so violently he snapped the thin copper wire he'd been adjusting. Crows, but the boy was an artist. The talent could not be suppressed, Robber would not allow it. It had to be encouraged, nay, *cultivated*! It would be a loss for Creation otherwise.

"Fire," Pickler coldly ordered.

The Page had not quite got out of the way, so when the trebuchet's counterweight came down he had to hurriedly hop to the side.

"Eyes on the stone, lordling," Robber called out.

The hero glared at him for the presumption before doing what he was supposed to and serving as a good little spotter for the

sappers of the Army of Callow. The boy's eyes narrowed after the stone hit the side of a steep-sloped hill to the left of the hollow's entrance.

"It shook," the Page said. "Stone shattered on the surface. No large crack, though, you'll need to get closer."

There was a shared sigh by everyone here who'd studied ballistics. Eight hundred feet was well into the range of an imperial trebuchet, which was the model the Army of Callow used. If the stones weren't enough to crack open the hills at this range, then ballistas – which shot further, but with significantly smaller projectiles – would do next to nothing if deployed. The choice left was either to keep hammering away with the trebuchets for hours or start pulling out more interesting ammunition. The Boss had made it clear that she wanted those hills torn open for her plan, and she hadn't looked like she was in mood for an argument as to the practicalities involved.

"Iron framework inside, do you think?" Robber asked Pickler.

She licked her chops thoughtfully, chewing on the thought.

"If your assessment of how hollow the hills are is even remotely correct," Pickler said, "then it is the most sensible theory. It could be wards, I suppose."

"Boss mentioned when one of the siege engines they've got was ripped away, the top of the hill came clean off with it," Robber noted. "She thought the platform was sculpted from the stone, but maybe..."

"It was simply anchored in metal beams that crisscross the summit of those caverns," Pickler approvingly said. "It would be metal strengthened with spellcraft, to have had this particular effect, so more likely steel than iron."

Long, spindly fingers – she had sapper's hands, Pickler, delicate and deadly – drummed the side of the closest trebuchet thoughtfully.

"We'll keep hammering away at the eastern hills," the Sapper-General decided. "Nothing we have will crack the western ones right now. I dislike relying on sabotage, but it seems necessary this once."

Without even a need to be ordered, the sappers around them heeded her words: the nine trebuchets were prepared for concentrated fire, pivoted on their platforms. Like a swarm of ants, the goblins to work. The Page looked quite discomfited, staring at them uneasily, so Robber decided to lend his help. Sidling up to the boy, he offered a wide and fanged grin.

"Do tell me about these *paumes*, good sir," Robber asked. "Unlike my ignorant and hidebound colleagues, I am always open to heeding superior Proceran learning."

The boy's face lit up with enthusiasm, and from the corner of his eye Special Tribune Robber caught sight of a lieutenant kicking a trebuchet stone in fury.

Would Catherine be open to permanently assigning the boy to him, he wondered?

—

Roland de Beaumaraais suspected that many would have envied the surface of his current situation — namely, walking forward slowly as four beautiful women were pressed up against him. The whole part about it also involving a tricky illusion spell and being surrounded by undead desiring to kill them all might have been considered something of a drag, mind you, and sadly he wouldn't even be able to remember the experience fondly. Not when Sidonia kept elbowing him, as the Levantine heroine just had the most horridly bony elbows, or when the Silent Guardian was not stepping on his feet for the eight time.

Gods that plate armour was heavy, aside from the fact that the Guardian herself was in no way a small woman.

"My foot," the Rogue Sorcerer croaked out in a whisper. "*Please* be careful."

To the Silent Guardian's credit, she looked somewhat apologetic and tapped his shoulder in apology. That already put her ahead of Sidonia, who'd just snickered when told she kept elbowing him.

"Stop whining," the Blessed Artificer said. "You'll give us away."

That Adanna of Smyrna spoke the reproach without so much as a hint of irony to her voice was, in its own way, impressive. Roland made himself count to five so he would not indulge in a retort and then they resumed their slow advance. The paths that Catherine's worrying goblin lieutenant had found proved true eventually, the third attempt allowing them to slip into a crevice that led into the great caverns below the hills. There'd been difficulties on the way, of course, but between Roland's knack for ward-breaking and the Silver Huntress' keen senses they'd managed to avoid giving themselves away.

It was inside they'd been forced to stay under illusion, as the place was crawling with undead. Even in the rare hallways Binds were always patrolling, and Roland pressed close to the wall as the other Chosen did the same to once more avoid the edge of his illusion being touched by a patrol of thirty undead soldiers in

pristine armour. The caverns were shaking from the pounding of the Army of Callow's engines was giving the surface, but while sometimes stones were loosened the place seemed in no danger of collapse. He could understand why Catherine had taken the risk to send them here, now.

Only a band of Chosen would be able to see this through halfway quietly, or without everyone involved dying in the process.

"We're close," the Silver Huntress murmured. "Only one level left. Adanna, you're sure you can't do it from here?"

The device the Blessed Artificer had prepared ought to be able to collapse the cavern's ceiling, but she'd insisted it ought to be triggered as close to it as possible. There were hallway rings going up the sides, fortunately, and four nerve-racking levels up the five of them now stood close to the highest they'd be able to stand. There was a fifth level, but it seemed narrowed than the others.

"I could have done it from the bottom," the Artificer peevishly replied, "but that would be rolling dice. I can only *guarantee* results from the level above us."

"Then we go," the Huntress sighed. "Steady and careful, all."

The illusion Roland was currently using covered sound, so long as it was of sufficiently low pitch. It was why he'd picked something otherwise so unstable and finicky among his repertoire. Which was why when a great axe sunk into the wall just above his head, a tall Revenant in pale plate smiling mirthlessly as the spell shattered, he was rather surprised.

Halfway quietly was out, the Rogue Sorcerer mused. Time to see if 'without everyone involved dying' could still be salvaged,

—

There was a moment of silence as a massive lance of Light tore through the hilltops on the left side of Lauzon's Hollow, spinning up in the sky like some behemoth's spit until it thinned and vanished into a shower of motes. Trails of smoke followed behind, the heat from the priestly power having set small fires and scorched rock.

"You know," Robber said, looking at the rising smoke, "when the Boss told me there would be sabotage, I figured it would be something a little more..."

"Subtle?" Pickler suggested.

"Yeah," he faintly replied. "That works."

Was that from the woman that looked like Wasteland get? Gobbler knew it couldn't be the Vagrant Spear or the Silver Huntress – the former would have had Archer bragging up a storm, while the latter would instead probably have tried to kill Archer by now. The Rogue Sorcerer was a skillful meddler but no user of Light, and the Silent Guardian was by reputation a solid warrior but not particularly powerful. That left only the woman with the Ashuran accent and those golden highborn eyes that had Robber feeling wary every time he saw them. People with them were usually quite dangerous, when they got to live up to the Blessed Artificer's age.

"It will do the trick, regardless," Pickler shrugged. "Shame they didn't get the enemy engine, but I supposed it will have to do."

In front of them, the trebuchets snapped into motion. One after another they pounded at the hillside, until finally the thunderous crack the sappers had been working at for an entire bell finally resounded. The Page excitedly informed them there was a large fissure now. Another seven stones and finally the side of the hill collapsed. The iron bones that'd held it up were still to be glimpsed in the rubble, twisted and bent but rarely broken. The sight matched that on the eastern slopes, which had been smashed a more than half a bell ago.

"Hold fire," the Sapper-General ordered. "The trebuchets are done. Begin advancing the copperstone ballistas as soon as the Third advances."

Ignoring the Page who was asking whether he could finally leave, Robber picked out one of the trebuchets and began to climb his way up the beams. Unlike his fellows, he had an inkling of what was coming and he wanted as fine a seat to witness it as he could. Deftly raising himself atop one of the legs supporting the pivot, he watched as a great wyvern took to the sky from near the frontlines. Not a real beast that one, it didn't move quite right, but his sharp eyes caught sight of two silhouettes on its back. The Summoner would be one, he knew, but he wasn't sure for the second.

Archer ought to be with the Third, since it'd serve as vanguard, but you never knew with the Boss. Not like she was low on Named these days, anyway. The speculation served to entertain him as the wyvern flew forward, swarms and a wyrm rising to meet it in the distance. A death warrant for the two Named gone out, if it'd been meant to be anything except a distraction. It wasn't, though, and with a pleasurable shiver Robber felt the air begin to thicken. He gulped down his breaths as if struggling against an unwilling Creation, the sheer powerbeing gathered always surprising him. It was good for this army to be reminded exactly what the Black Queen was now and then, the Special Tribune felt.

Cat played nicer, these days, so sometimes the westerners forgot who it was exactly that'd won the Tenth Crusade.

A large circular gate winked open in the sky above Lauzon's Hollow, and to Robber's delighted surprise a heartbeat later a *second* one did. Sahelian was finally earning her keep, then. The hollowed out hills on both sides of the pass had been torn open at the top and smashed in the front, so now all that was left was using that broadened field of engagement and giving a pitched battle – or so conventional wisdom would have suggested. That wasn't the Boss' way, though, not at all. She rarely settled for a single knife in the kidney, it was one of the more charming things about her.

So it was with utter glee that Robber began cackling when he realized that the gates in the sky weren't connected to the Twilight Ways at all. The way water began pouring out of them was something of a hint.

—

Roland pulled deep on one his strongest offensive magics, forming fire and turning it dense and liquid before tossing a hundred droplets of it at the mass of skeletons coming after them. The Vagrant Spear, pulling the unconscious Adanna closer to her, turned just long enough to send a blast of Light at the armoured Revenant still pursuing them, cursing angrily in Ceseo when the dead hero shrugged it off like he had everything else they'd thrown at him. Nothing made a dent: not steel, not sorcery, not even Light. The Silent Guardian had managed to throw him off the ledge earlier, the most success they'd had, but he'd been back before long.

With more Revenants, of course, for the Gods despise Roland deeply and wanted him to die screaming.

Alexis put a seventh arrow in the shield-bearing titan of a woman coming after them with a halberd, that Revenant's unsettling laugh echoing across the cavern even through the cacophony of an entire army mobilizing to kill them. Arrows clattered against the wall as they passed by a pillar, just a second too slow to catch any of them, but already they were being charged at by armored skeletons ahead and javelins were in flight from somewhere he'd not even looked at yet! Swallowing bile, already feeling the raw sting of his aspects being leaned on too harshly, Roland conjured a shield to take care of the javelins.

The Silent Guardian plowed into the skeletons a heartbeat later, smashing everything aside like a bull in a house of glass, but deep down the Rogue Sorcerer knew it wouldn't enough. It was still two levels down before they'd get to the crevice they'd squeezed in through and there was simply no way they were going to last that long : opposition was hardening the further down

they got. The Guardian screamed when a great barbed arrow punched through her mail, shot by some distant Revenant with a black iron bow, and though the Silver Huntress managed to turn aside a blow of the Revenant in pale plate and throw him off the ledge again, it was a temporary relief at best. Already the one with the halberd was coming at her, and now that the Silent Guardian was wounded and was going to start struggling with their front it would all be-

A wall of water came down from the sky, smashing through the holed that'd been melted through the ceiling of the cavern. The halberd Revenant was caught by a stream and smashed into the wall as the Huntress danced away just in time.

"That also works," Roland admitted.

Mind you, if they didn't figure a way out of this soon they were just going to drown instead. Still, this was already a distinct improvement. *Thank you Catherine, he mused. Very timely of you.* Screaming at each other so they could hear over the roar of the falling waters, the Rogue Sorcerer and the Silver Huntress agreed on a plan. If you could call an agreement to get the Hells out of here as quick as possible that. Water was beginning to gush down with them, and to their horror it was already filling the crevice they'd used to come in. They'd need another way out. Thankfully, even as they were wondered what in the Merciful Heavens that would be, scaffolding on the level above them collapsed.

A large flat piece of wood, one that must have served as a work platform, bounced down and rolled slightly downhill until the wounded and white-faced Guardian caught it with a hand. It was large enough for all of them, Roland noted, and quite likely to float. He met Alexis' eyes, then shrugged.

"Do you have a better idea?" he asked.

She didn't.

—

General Abigail shivered.

It was not the first time she'd seen this horror unleashed. Even if her memory had allowed her to forget the first day of the Battle of the Camps, her nightmares would not have. The gates did not look the same, now sleek rinks of darkness rather than the thin slices into Creation the Black Queen had once wielded, but then as now the sky had opened and wept. Abigail remembered the hate that'd simmered under the fear, back in those days where it'd been the Principate they'd fought. The way she'd known that their queen was a monster but she was not a monster who had sought this war, that it had been forced on all of them by a

handful of rapacious princes in their palaces across the Whitecaps.

But not even then had she believed the invaders deserved that cold, brutal and senseless end.

Not the sky wept again, two gates torn into the fabric of the world high above, and like jugs being filled the hills that'd been ripped open by siege engines received the deluge. Even stone shattered, when the water came from so high, and before long the hordes the Dead King had hidden within his caverns began pouring out on the tide half-smashed. The water rushed out of the broken hills, taking with it rocks and corpses and steel, and began to spread into the plains below. In the sky above Named skirmished with horrors and Revenants, Light streaking bright as the flood gates were protected from disruption. It wouldn't last forever, Abigail thought, but it wouldn't have to. That'd never been the plan.

Water stormed out of the pass itself now, having overrun the hills themselves and swept into the hollow between them, the tide bowling over the undead and smashing the fortifications at the mouth of Lauzon's Hollow. The mud would make for unpleasant fighting grounds, Abigail thought, but it would hinder the undead as well. And it was the cost for something almost priceless: right now, as the waters kept hurling down from the gates, the Dead King's waiting army had been essentially dispersed. All preparations, positions and traps and been unmade by the brute force of thousands of tons of water coming down from the sky. It would not win them the battle by itself, but as far as first strokes went it was a masterful one.

Let it not be said the Black Queen had come by her reputation dishonestly.

It was not even half an hour before the first enemy got through and took a swing at a gate, making it stutter, and within moments both gates had winked out of existence. Water kept pouring from a blue a cloudless sky, jarring to behold, but General Abigail knew what was required of her now.

"Krolem," she said. "Have the advance sounded."

"Ma'am," the orc saluted.

Water still flowed but the plains were large and it had not rained in days: the earth would drink the tide in full, and it would not take so long as one might think. Abigail would not waste the advantage she had been given.

"Good, you're not dragging your feet."

The dark-haired woman almost fell down her horse, utterly startled, and froze in a different kind of fear when she saw exactly who it was that'd addressed her. The absurdly large bow would have been answer enough, even if the dark linen scarf and long coat had not been just as telling a sign. The Archer was not an uncommon sight around the camps of the Army of Callow, though Abigail preferred to avoid Named like the plague when she could.

"Pardon?" General Abigail got out.

"You're attacking," the ochre-skinned villainess said, smiling pleasantly. "Like Catherine wanted you to. Don't be afraid to press your luck in the assault, general, we're not done with surprises for the day."

"I, uh, of course," Abigail stammered. "You are to be the Named that comes with the Third, then?"

"Something like that," Archer grinned. "Don't worry your pretty little head about it."

Abigail noted that her horse was looking at the villainess with fear-tinged distrust as well. A wise animal than she'd believed, she conceded.

"I'll see you around, general," the Archer winked. "Don't go disappointing me, now."

"I wouldn't dare," Abigail replied, a lot more honestly than she'd meant to.

Luck was on her side, and so the Named drifted away as she laughed. The general took the time to gather herself, straightening her back and breathing out. She had a battle to get through. In the distance in front of her, horns sounded as the Third Army's ranks tightened into a shield wall and it began to advance. Noting its unease, General Abigail patted her horse's neck and mercifully ignored the attempt to bite her fingers she received in return.

"If you get through this, Boots, I might take you with me when I retire," Abigail of Summerholm muttered. "If you're unhappy about being in this mess, that already makes you the second smartest animal in this bloody army."

Onwards they went anyway, to swift death and graves shallow.

Interlude: New Tricks

"Surprise is not a fixed quality. Yesterday's coup is tomorrow's blunder."

– Theodosius the Unconquered, Tyrant of Helike

Princess Beatrice Volignac of Hainaut believed in being honest with herself even when it was painful to do so.

Particularly when it was painful. Even when back when she'd only been the sister of the ruler of Hainaut, she had known that there would be great dangers in refusing to look the realities of Creation in the eye. It was why she did not bother to pretend that she was anything but fat, even when her high birth meant that flatterers offered up sweet lies insisting otherwise by the basketful. She was fat and she would not slim up. It was the way of things, something she did not like but would have to live with. Allowing herself to indulge in a fantasy world at the expense of reality was just being childish, and childishness in a woman of her rank was the road to an early grave.

And now she was not a mere princess' sister anymore, she was *the* Volignac. Julianne had gone off and chased a death worthy of song, leaving Beatrice with two grieving nephews as well as a crown she'd never expected she would have to wear. This was Procer and here blood mattered – especially when it was as old as that of the House of Volignac – so Beatrice was still being treated as royalty, but she had no illusions about what she truly was: the leader of a large armed gang, dependent on the charity of the high throne and foreign powers for her survival. She was royalty only so long as no one cared to challenge it, and should the army she'd salvaged from ruin perish it would be the end of Hainaut as a realm. There could be no return when one's rule extended only to ashes and refugees.

And so Beatrice had thought herself cleverer than those Langevin whoresons in Cleves, at least, whose smidgeon of safety had deluded into thinking that they could afford to *plot* when the very end times were at their doorstep. The staggering stupidity of Gaspard Langevin's manoeuvring still surprised her – had the man truly forgot that more than half the forces defending his lands were foreign, that some of the very same Firstborn he wanted to slight had bled for Cleven grounds? It'd been a comfort, cradling that knowledge. And yet now, as Beatrice Volignac's fingers tightened around her lance, she was forced to acknowledge that in some ways she had been a fool as well.

Queen Catherine Foundling of Callow was an easy-going woman. That temper was legend, true, but it was not easily provoked and when in a good mood the young queen was both amiable and impulsively generous. She was free with honours others in her position would have clutched tight. The Queen of Callow's obvious lack of schooling in the mores of one of high birth was an occasional figure of fun in Proceran circles, for she was cunning in the way that a peasant or a tradesman was cunning – without polish, without elegance. Beatrice was not fool enough to consider the Black Queen of Callow a mere savage, but between the cordiality

and the lowbrow habit she'd come to forget who it was that she was dealing with.

Then hills were cracked open, the sky opened and an army was smashed by celestial deluge all in the span of an hour.

Beatrice remembered the stories, then, of the Battle of the Camps. Of the Doom of Liesse, of what Callowan veterans fondly called the 'Arcadian Campaign' – as if it were not utter howling madness, to have *invaded the realm of the fae* – and at last of the Princes' Graveyard, where sport had been made of her kind as none had dared since Theodosius the Unconquered. The Black Queen did not bother with the proper courtesies, Princess Beatrice remembered, because after the Graveyard there was not a living ruler left who could demand them of her. The Princess of Hainaut let that sink truth sink into her bones, breathed deep of it. It would not be forgot again, she swore.

Princess Beatrice let the fear settle down, reminding herself that this once the horror was on her side, and turned her gaze to the enemy. Already the Third Army under its canny fox of a general was advancing at a brisk pace, red-painted shields locked tight in a shield wall. The waters had not yet finished flowing, but they'd slowed and would soon die out. Behind them would be left muddy grounds and a roiling mass of undead, an unprotected and hindered formation that the Army of Callow was already punishing with sustained artillery fire. The rumoured 'copperstones' fired by the Sapper-General's ballistae burned with bright Light where they hit, incinerating bone and unmaking necromancy.

The battle plan, as it currently stood, dictated that the flanks of the coalition army would wait a span before advancing as well. Beatrice understood the purpose, for she had made some study of war: it was hoped that the enemy reinforcements already pouring out from deeper in the pass could be drawn back into the water-emptied caverns by the Third Army's hasty advance, in an attempt by Keter to pincer that force as it pulled ahead of the rest of the coalition army. This was a risk, on the surface, but in truth it was the Black Queen's attempt to limit casualties on their side as much as possible. She wanted, in Beatrice's opinion, to draw the dead into fighting her at the mouth of the pass.

There, where Keter's number could not be brought to bear as they would in a broader field, the Queen of Callow wanted to eat up an army of one hundred thousand one bite at a time. The battle lines would stabilize once the flanks caught up to the Third Army, and when they were the artillery could be brought to bear on the massed undead facing the coalition. In a very real sense, the Grand Alliance soldiers would not be the executioner's axe but the chopping block: their purpose would be drawing out the enemy and keeping them in the artillery's killing field, not

necessarily to do a great deal of damage themselves. The young queen's art of war was not famed without reason, though the Princess of Hainaut did not believe it would be quite so simple.

It never was, with Keter.

Yet blind worries were no reason to stand paralyzed, so when Princess Beatrice Volignac received the word from their supreme commander she passed down the order to her captains. Trumpets sounded, a bright clarion call, and the drumrolls began as the last army of Hainaut began its advance intermixed with companies of fantassins. To the east the Levantines mirrored her advance, and just as the Third Army reached the edge of where the waters had touched – where the dead had been swept up – the march of the flanks finally began. The Queen of Callow's plans were proceeding nicely so far, Beatrice saw. A stream of reinforcements had hurried out of the deeper pass to prevent the Third from just sweeping through, and when finally it made contact with the shield wall of the Third Army both forces slowed in the morass of mud and steel that the water had made. The undead did not have sharp enough teeth to smash a Callowan shield wall, though, so the stream split.

The caverns, torn open for all to peer into them, were beginning to fill with undead attempting to go around the enemy's shield wall. Instead of just fighting in front, the dead were trying to bring their numbers to bear by attacking on the flanks as well – for now only splashing harmless at the sides of that stout eastern square formation, but the undead were gathering numbers to mount more serious assaults. The enemy was moving too quickly, Beatrice thought as she watched with narrowed eyes. Light skeletons, without armour and barely armed, had been sent out first and *en masse* as they were not so prone to getting stuck in the mire.

The Princess of Hainaut sent for one of her captains and ordered that the roll of the drums be quickened, setting a quicker march. If she waited too long, she feared that the Third Army might be entirely surrounded before reinforcements arrived. That would be a disaster, especially should the well-armed Callowan soldiers rise in the service of Keter. No wonder Callow was bereft of all beauty, she sometimes thought when looking at the pristine armaments of the Army of Callow. All the wealth there had gone into war. Would that Julianne and their father before her had practiced that same folly, which in these dark times was no folly at all. The House of Volignac had more use for plate than palaces these days.

The Princess' eyes drifted to the hills in the distance, beyond the fighting, where she had been told that a great siege engine still awaited. It had yet to fire a single shot, but as far as

she knew the Chosen had not destroyed it. What was Keter waiting for, then?

—

"We're through with the easy part now, ducklings," Sergeant Hadda growled. "Shields steady and mind your right. Don't get smart, it doesn't pay off against the skellies."

Edgar breathed out, feeling the usual tremor of fear going down his spine. He'd be all right when the shield wall made contact with the enemy, but until then he knew from experiences the nerves would stay with him. Orders had come from above for the fourth cohort — of which Captain Pickering's company was the second company — to move to from the back to the left flank, to prevent the enemy outflanking the army. Felt odd to be turning his back to the dead in front of them, coming out of the Hollow, but then Edgar was just turning to look other undead in the face wasn't he?

"Liked it better when we were just smashing the downed bones," Edith muttered at his side. "Like a dangerous chore, but still better than the fucking shield wall."

Edgar snorted. A dangerous chore had been a good word for it. The Black Queen had called forth the tides to smash the enemy's hidden army, and when it'd washed up in a sea of mud and roiling undeath the front ranks of the Third Army had sent forth the priests of the House Insurgent. Streaks of blinding Light had hit the struggling skeletons and ghouls, carving smoking furrows into the mud, but it'd been the task of the legionaries following behind them to shatter any bones they saw sprouting out. Not harmless work, this, for sometimes skeletons played deader than they were and nasty surprises of mud and steel came at you from below. But like Edith — surprisingly sensible, for a Liessen girl — had said, still a damned sight better than the shield wall.

There, sometimes luck just meant you didn't get back up in the Enemy's service when you died.

The company moved into place as smoothly as was possible on muddy ground, a line of twenty moving to the front. Edgar's own line made up the second rank, which meant they'd see fighting before long. Over the shoulder of a shorter soldier, he saw pale bare skeletons with only spears in hand deftly going through the mud. Companies filled in to the side of Edgar's own, broadening the shield wall before the enemy could sweep around it, and he breathed out quietly. If he'd been in the first rank, he wouldn't have dared to take his eyes off the enemy even when he caught movement above. In the second, though, he risked a glance.

It wasn't the Summoner and another Named engaging vultures up in the sky, as now that the flood gates had closed they'd fled. Too

low, anyway, and too quick. It was with quicksilver surprise that Edgar realized he was looking at artillery fire. Some sort of enormous spear had been fired, or perhaps a pillar? Whatever the truth of it, a great length of dark stone fell into the back ranks of the Third Army, killing a dozen with the impact. Edgars' fingers tightened with fear at the sight, for the black stone was glowing with runes. A heartbeat later, there was a crackling sound and a burst of sorcery followed by screams, half a company dying in a heartbeat in a mess of lightning.

Another pulse, and the dead rose.

The companies in the back of the Third turned to face the fresh threat – and while another pillar was shot at them, it burst in midair as if artillery fire of their own had somehow caught it – but the pulses kept coming. Always the same two, lightning and necromancy, but it was a potent combination and the streaks of Light and sorcery thrown at the pillar did nothing. Edgar of Laure breathed out and looked away. Fear ran in his veins as the distant sound of great drums began to thrum, but he could no longer afford to look anywhere but forward. The first wave of skeletons charged forward in utter silence.

"Dauntless," Sergeant Hadda screamed.

"Dauntless," they howled back, and for a moment the boast chased away the gloom.

—

Gods, Indrani grimly thought. *That's a new one.*

What the Hells was that pillar? She recognized the stone from their trip into the Crown of the Dead a few years back – she'd never seen that exact tone of black anywhere but in the deepest reaches of the Dead King's fortress – but it was the first time she'd ever seen this particular breed of nastiness. It was a pretty simple setup, but the alternating pulses had already chewed through two companies and all attempts to handle the situation ended up turning into oil tossed at the flame. Not that she could afford to spare much time looking. The enemy's siege engine was still firing the damn pillars, and there were only so many heavy arrows in her quiver – three, actually, and she was already on her last. That would mean three pillars swatted out of their trajectory, at least, but somehow she doubted Keter would be running out of ammunition the same time she did.

Nocking the last heavy arrow, Archer suppressed a grimace as she saw another blackstone pillar let loose. She breathed out, steadied her aim, then drew and released. Indrani didn't even bother to watch if she'd hit, already knowing she would. Normally she'd have a few more heavy arrows, but today Cat had sent her out to handle constructs so it was unravellers she'd loaded up

with. Useful things, those, but unlikely to dent a pillar. Pickler's copperstone ballistas were still chewing up the undead coming out of the pass so the Third wasn't in danger of collapsing anytime soon, but casualties were already mounting and that slippery eel General Abigail had left Archer behind at some point.

Glancing ahead, Indrani found that beorns were massing in the pass. House-sized abominations resembling bears, damned hard to put down and surprisingly agile for their size. They also carried bellyfuls of undead soldiers, which made them a bloody plague for regulars: it was like a living battering ram spewing out soldiers. Archer bit her lip. She couldn't do anything more about the pillars, it'd have to be one of Catherine's contingencies that handled it. She could begin hammering away at the constructs, though, so even as another pillar was shot in the distance Indrani reached for an unraveller and knocked it.

In that, at least, she could tip the scales.

—

You have no assignment, the Black Queen had told him. Follow providence where it leads you.

Balzer, who men now knew as the Sage, had done so without qualms. Even the Peregrine had been burned by that villainess' wiles and he would not gainsay them when they stood on the same side. So the Sage had retreated into himself, closing all shutters so that nothing might obscure the sensation of the slight nudges of Fate. And Fate had led him not to stand with the Dominion's warriors, with whom he shared blood, or the Procerans he had sworn to protect from the Enemy's attentions. It was with this strange Third Army that his steps had taken him. Not even to fight on the front, though Balzer knew many secrets of destruction beyond those of his fists, but to stand at the back.

He understood why only when black stone fell from the sky as a pillar and death bloomed around it.

Balzer had learned many secrets, for which some called him wise and others had decreed him a sage — even Sage, in time. But enlightenment was not a shared road, it was the struggle within: lonely, endless, forever reaching for unattainable perfection. So he was not surprised when the priests of the House Insurgent molded their faith bright and threw it against the black stone to no avail. No candle could light up the ink-black sea. And what could sorcery do, be it flame or thunder? Only a fool sought to beat a devil at devils' tricks. In this, though, he could lend aid. The Sage waded through the fresh undead, smashing skulls through helmets as he glided through their ranks, and before long beheld the pillar from up close.

"What a malevolent thing you are," the Sage murmured, eyes narrowing.

Kill, the black stone sang. *Take. Kill. Take.* Its insistence washed over him like morning mist, even the touch of lightning – the Light within him was greater than what the Enemy's work could bring to bear. Balzer pressed his palm against the stone, disliking its feverish warmth but not lingering on such ephemeral things. Like the river, he must flow and never cease. It was the opposite with this thing of stone and dread, for it was a shell hosting pulsing hate and greed and nothing more. Shells always had weaknesses, and the Sage found this one's before long. Undead grasped at his back, but he was swift and his oneness with Light blinded their eyes.

"Begone," Balzer ordered, and struck.

In his right hand he held the power to **Destroy**, learned from years of studying the lingering wisps divine wrath had left behind on this world, and it was this he unleashed against the work of Trismegitus. The black stone shattered under his fist, revealing a howling sorcerous heart, and this he snatched and snuffed out. For a moment, when it died, he thought he had heard a word. Not enough to **Divine** anything from it, but perhaps with meditation... The sky above spewed out another pillar of black stone, falling among soldiers to deliver thundering death. Ah, opportunity. The Sage smiled.

Today was a good day, he decided, and sought the next pillar of black stone.

—

Lord Razin Tanja of the Binder's Blood threw down his shield, for the javelin might not have punched through but it'd made it good as useless anyway. That was the third shield he'd gone through since the battle began, and he'd already had two horses killed under him: Keter was in fine form today. His sworn swords, which had served as the vanguard, were holding steady ahead of him. Malaga was upholding its honour today, though it was Aquiline who was adding deeds to the Rolls for her Blood – she'd taken a few slayers and Lanterns to kill a Tusk that'd passed by the Archer's punitive barrage, giving the killing blow herself.

It ought to put her in a better mood, wiping away the disgrace that'd been getting wounded on the first real day of fighting of the campaign.

The dead were holding firm under the assault of the Dominion, the Lord of Malaga found when he scrutinized the battle lines. The warriors of Levant weren't making enough of a dent to push back the enemy, though they were themselves in no danger of losing ground. Much as Razin would have preferred a more glorious bent

to the battle, he could not deny that the Black Queen's plan was working: the copperstone ballistas of the Army of Callow were tearing through entire companies of the enemy as they poured out of the pass to reinforce, focusing on the centre in front of the Third Army.

It was not a great honour for his warriors and Aquiline's to be used as mere hooks keeping the metaphorical fish from wriggling out of the ballistas' reach, Razin Tanja thought, but if it led to victory he would make his peace with it. The Procerans had been tasked with the same on their wing, anyhow, so there was hardly a surfeit of honour to go around – only Abigail the Fox, that ruthless and cunning general who'd bled his binders so starkly at the Graveyard, had claimed any by being given the pivotal role of the day. Still, there was no reason for the Dominion not to try to seize a better position. Razin sent for his captains and ordered a push at the very edge of the right flank, led by Lanterns and axemen. One of his sworn swords brought him his fourth shield of the day, and the Lord of Malaga pondered whether he should rejoin the ranks. The men fought better when he fought with them.

The decision was stolen from him when Keter acted first. From the broken ceiling of the caverns a great cacophony came as a devilry kept back was suddenly unleashed: the surviving swarms from the first day, birds and bats and insects, flowed out like a tide with ear-breaking shrieks. The Lord of Malaga swallowed a curse. Of all the armies of men, the Dominion struggled with these horrors the most.

"BINDERS," Razin Tanja screamed. "BINDERS, ON THE SWARMS."

—

The Summoner snorted derisively when he saw those Dominion savages fumble around with their so-called sorcery. Half-baked diabolism was what it was, this use of souls as anchors for bodies made of their surroundings – in this case, largely mud and stone. Not all the binders could forge flying creatures, either, further proof of their fundamental incompetence. Cedric reminded himself that not all could equal his own mastery, but it was a half-hearted thought and almost more a boast than a commiseration.

"You are certain your creature is capable?" the Concocter asked.

Beneath them, his summoned wyvern batter of her wings as she sped towards the undead swarms. The Summoner cast his colleague a scornful look.

"A little late for asking, yes?" Cedric sneered.

She rolled her eyes, the insolent wretch. Gods, but the Black Queen simply did not recognize his worth – always she used him as a horse-handler for some inferior Named, when he could have done it all on his own.

“My concoctions will work as promised,” the Concocter flatly said. “The only possible point of failure here is your work.”

The Summoner scoffed.

“My works is always beyond reproach,” he said. “It is why I have been judged too valuable to send to the Arsenal, unlike some others.”

She probably would have argue with this self-evident truth, so Cedric ordered his summon to bank hard upwards and leaned closer to its neck. The containers the Concocter had loaded its belly with made the construct less manoeuvrable, but he’d learned to compensate. It would not matter, anyway, he thought. Unlike what his colleague believed, the containers would not simply be spat out. Cedric manipulated his summon to constrict its ‘stomach’ when they neared the edge of the swarms, breaking a container even as it opened its mouth. Like the old dragons of legend, his summon breathed out a gout of something – though it was a gas instead of fire, rather lessening the effect.

The gas did its work, the Summoner was forced to admit even as he began leading the wyvern into making a long pass through the mass of undead creatures, spewing out clouds all the while. The brew attacked the necromantic constructs almost as holy water would have, eating at them and disrupting the spell holding them together – it was particularly lethal on insects, but even the birds collapsed after a heartbeat of exposure.

Yet another victory to be laid at his feet, the Summoner thought with smug satisfaction.

—

General Abigail figured this must be a little like how a chicken would feel, if it were still alive when you put it on a spit to roast.

Just enough movement to give you the illusion that you might make it out, when in fact you were just spinning around so that you could be roasted more evenly. Sadly still on her horse, the general hid another wince as she watched another pack of ghouls leap over the shield wall at the front and land atop the shield panels of the mage cabals, then wiggle through a weakness in them. The Third Army was being made to stand and take the bloody hits to the Sapper-General of Callow could pound the enemy into dust with her ballistas, a strategy that Abigail would admit to

herself she would have been very fond of if it didn't involve her standing so close to the killing field.

Boots, that bloody horse, seemed to have grasped that they were in it together at least until the end of the battle – it was cooperating, and had not tried to bite her in at least an hour. From that unfortunately dangerous vantage point, General Abigail watched the field. It'd been hours since the battle began, long enough that some of the mud was beginning to dry, but for all the efforts on both sides it remained a stalemate. Revenants had tried to smash the front lines a few times, but Named had met them head on and gotten the better of them. Most the time, anyway. Some devil in pale plate had killed a villain and only retreated when the band under the Silver Huntress reappeared to force him back.

It'd be a while still until sundown, Abigail figured, but there would be no clear winner today. The trouble was that even with rotations the people were getting damned tired, and the Procerans likely had it worse on their flank: half of them were mercenaries, and unlike the Dominion on the right they didn't have the numbers to be able to keep back a reserve. It might all turn nasty, if they weren't careful, and even with the Second Army still being held in reserve a lot of damage might happen very quickly if the left flank went sour. The trouble was that, when it came to what she could actually do to help prop up the left flank, General Abigail saw only the one option and she wasn't exactly eager to take it.

"Might not be as bad as what happens if we wait, though," she muttered at her horse.

She considered the risks. Gods, much as she hated to admit it doing nothing might be the more dangerous of the two. The Volignac soldiers were a hardy lot, but the mercenaries didn't have the same stomach for the right. If some started running... Abigail still held back on doing anything until she saw the first fantassin company break, cursing and giving orders to her general staff even if the mercenary company managed to rally and return into position. It was only going to get worse the longer she waited, and with Abigail's luck everyone up here was going to pull a runner except her own damned army.

After dismounting she gathered as many companies of heavies as she dared to pull to her and arranged for a wedge. She sent for the Third Army's standard, picked some poor bastard to carry it into battle and waited for the orders she'd given to trickle down to the House Insurgent and the mage cabals. The change was noticeable, when it happened: from defensive to offensive. The priests struck out with mass volleys as shields winked out and were replaced by great spears of flame either.

"Gods," Abigail faintly muttered. "How bad could it really have been, being a tanner?"

Too late to back out now, she knew. After pulling all those heavy companies to her, if she gave the command to someone else they'd turn on her for cowardice. *Ah*, she realized with a start, but there was a way to avoid fighting. She found the poor bastard she'd given the army standard too and sent him back to the ranks with a smile, taking it up herself. See, with that thing in hand she wouldn't be able to use a sword so no one could expect her to – *shit*, Abigail, realized, she could no longer use a sword. And Keter might go after the standard to hurt morale. She'd made herself a target again.

"Are you ready, general?" Krolem asked.

They were all looking at her, Abigail saw, waiting for her order. The swallowed a whimper, which came out sound a little like a giggle. Some of her officers looked impressed.

"Forward," General Abigail ordered. "Into the breach, Dauntless."

For once, she was lucky: the answering roar of approval drowned out how shrilly terrified her voice had really been.

Chapter 59: Materialism

"Victory in war comes by three parts: fighting, diplomacy and strategy. No single third is sufficient to bring victory alone, and each is neglected at great peril."

– Extract from the 'Ars Tactica', famed military treatise of Dread Emperor Terribilis the First

It was a nice afternoon, if you discounted all the dying.

As the opening strokes of the second battle for Lauzon's Hollow fought under my command began to reverberate, I sat on high chair and watched as I absent-mindedly tore into a late midday meal. A meat pie, still warm with the juices splattering on my armour when I bit deep. The prelude had, to my mixed pleasure and wariness, unfolded largely as I'd planned. The band of five under the Silver Huntress had blown open a hole on the top of the western hilltops, allowing for both gates opened into Arcadia to hit the armies hidden beneath the hollow hills directly. Pickler had cracked open the hills beforehand, of course, since I wasn't in the market for just making cavern lakes: the entire point had been to wash out the enemy army.

"How many inside, do you think?" Akua said. "At least twenty thousand by my count."

The shade stood upright at my side, in an intricate gold-accented dark dress and veil whose occasional flickering betrayed the gate had taken a lot more out of her than she liked to admit. It'd taken even more out of me, of course, since Akua drew Night through my own connection to it. She could manipulate outside stocks of it just fine, as she had at the Princes' Graveyard when she'd called the eclipse, but otherwise she was also limited by what my body could stomach. Which was, at the moment, essentially nothing. Two large gates, precisely aligned to parts of Arcadia and for some time? And in broad daylight, to boot. No, I was effectively out of the fight until sundown and that meant so was she.

"Between that and twenty-five," I replied. "They weren't making full use of the caverns as a tactical asset otherwise, it would have been a waste."

"I wonder what general it is that faces us today," Akua mused. "Not Trismegistus himself, surely. He rarely takes the lead in such a direct manner."

Not that the Hidden Horror's consciousness wouldn't be flitting around the battlefield all day, anyway, along with his will. But Akua was right, Neshamah didn't usually serve as his own general – with good reason, since he was not a particularly outstanding one. Undead did not truly learn, after all, and he'd not been a military man while alive. His tactics were all imitations, something he was aware of and meant he usually used Binds or Revenants as generals instead. It was typical of his brutal streak of pragmatism that the Dead King would raise anew the commanders that'd been most troublesome to him and bind them to his service. I did not doubt he was the overall strategist of the Kingdom of the Dead's campaigns, mind you.

On the grand scale, the one beyond tactics, there really wasn't a thing in existence that could think the way the King of Death could.

"The Prince of Hannover mentioned the Princes of Bones usually commands all local undead as well as his own Grey Legion," I noted. "But I've seen no sign of him. It might be the Pale Knight, though admittedly he seemed more a champion than a general to me."

Or it could be a hundred other unseen trembling souls, none of which we'd even slightly sniffed out. We'd not yet dug so deep in the reserves of Keter that the Dead King had to be stingy with generals, to my enduring displeasure. I kept tearing into the meat pie as the battle began in earnest, the Third Army under General Abigail sounding the horns and beginning to advance. By now the tide of water flowing out of the caverns and the hollow was beginning to die out, swallowed by the thirsty ground and turning it to mud.

"Maybe ten thousand scrapped by the water," I said, sharpening my eyes with Night as I studied the field. "I'd hoped for more."

"The remainder are buried in mud, in disarray and often weaponless," Akua replied. "Your hunting hound in the Third will make good sport of them."

"She's meant to a lot more than that," I muttered.

Mind you, I didn't expect the Third to wipe out all those downed undead. The Third Army only made up the centre of my host's formation, with the Procerans under Beatrice Volignac making up the left wing and the Levantines under their Blood making up the right. I expected she'd bite off a hard chunk while advancing, falling upon it while it was not yet recovered, but she'd have to spread out the Third to get them all and that was the last thing either she or I wanted. After all, in the end the Third Army was *bait*.

"I was not brought into the full battle plan," the shade idly said, "but it seems to me that you are taking great risks with the array of your forces. The Third is pulling heavily ahead, and your left wing is... undermanned."

She wasn't wrong. Black would have blanched at this kind of battle array, which was a stark departure from the traditional Legion doctrine. My centre was a steady ten thousand legionaries and my right wing a wildly overstrength seventeen thousand Levantines, while my left wing was a mere six thousand Procerans. Mostly Volignac soldiers, principality troops, with some fantassins. The rest of the Proceran troops had been sent out to clear the lowlands with the drow under Ivah, after all, and had yet to return to the field. But then the three minds behind the modern Legions, Black and Grem One-Eye and Ranker, had built that model to smash mortal armies.

Fighting the Kingdom of the Dead was a different kind of war. One where the enemy did not tire, where being outnumbered at every turn was a near certainty and the enemy's arsenal bore a few more nasty surprises tailored to undermine your strength with every passing battle. I'd adapted to this war, though. Learned how to wage it.

"We came to Lauzon's Hollow to achieve two things," I said. "Seizing the pass itself and destroying the army defending it."

We couldn't just do one, unfortunately. Even we forced out the army and took the Hollow, we needed to destroy the enemy's fighting force here: even it retreated weakened, we couldn't afford to have it at our back while we moved on the capital. It'd be child's play to cut our supply lines if even just a few thousand raiders stayed loose around the Hollow, and we were

already outnumbered by the enemy so I was reluctantly to shake loose a garrison force to leave behind.

"The single worst way to achieve those objectives is assaulting Lauzon's Hollow," I said. "Taking fortifications is a war of attrition, and the moment the battle ends up in the narrow pass this becomes a slugging match that Keter will win nine times out of ten."

I'd seen battles turn that way before. The Dead King and his generals just began throwing corpses at us, well aware that even if the battle itself was lost they'd still win the war by effectively destroying our army in the trade-off. No, fighting in the pass was something I wanted to absolutely avoid – it was why our original campaign plan had called for the forces under General Pallas to strike at the Cigelin Sisters further north tomorrow and then swing south to pincer the enemy here as soon as they'd secured the fortress. That plan had obviously gone out the window since, but the underlying reasons for making it remained.

"Yet you are, in fact, assaulting Lauzon's Hollow," Akua drily pointed out.

"No, I'm not," I grunted. "We cracked open the hills, Akua, so now instead of fighting just at the mouth of the pass the battlefield got extended. These are proper grounds for classic Legion warfare, they just happen to be at the front of a pass."

"Which the opposing general will notice," the golden-eyed shade said. "Why prevents from retreating deeper in, where the pass narrows and your advantages evaporate?"

"Bait," I grimly smiled, "set out in two parts."

I finished the last of the meat pie, scarfing it down and licking the warm juices off my fingers. I pretended not to see the disapproving look thrown my way under the gauzy veil. In the distance, as the Third Army began plowing through the dead washed up by the waters, reinforcements began pouring out of the pass. Skeletons, yes, but also constructs. It'd be a hard fight. And as the dead who'd washed up on the flanks of the Third clawed their way out of the mud, still a disorganized horde, the enemy general did exactly what I'd wanted them to do: they sent out the horde in waves, trying to flank and even envelop the Third Army before the reinforcing wings could arrive. The enemy had committed.

The enemy's siege engine atop the hills began unleashing some deadly surprise, pillars of black stone, but Archer was with the Third and I'd left heroes floating: one of them would nip this in the bud before it turned too bad, providence good as ensured it.

"You seem pleased, which implies this dawning rout is exactly what you intended," Akua noted. "Which fits better with my

appraisal of Abigail of Summerholm than that of the overeager general who struck out too far ahead I am currently looking at."

I shrugged.

"It holds up, you know, for someone who's looked into our armies," I said. "If someone else had rushed too far it might be a trap, but the *Third*? I named them Dauntless personally, they've served as my vanguard in half a dozen wars and they're commanded by a rising star among my commanders – but a young one, who never went to the War College. Malicia will have records of that, which means the Dead King has them as well. If this were Hune rushing it'd be suspicious, but *this*?"

I grinned.

"Why, Akua, this isn't a trap," I said, "it's an opportunity. One Keter has seized quite eagerly."

So the dead had come out swinging from the pass in the distance, pouring reinforcements and trying to swallow up the Third before the seemingly feet-dragging Procerans and Levantines caught up and handled the flanks. From an outside eye, that tortured formation – one wing too strong, the other too weak – would have been forced on me by politics and a fear of trouble in a shared command structure, not more tactical considerations. I'd split the wings by nation of birth and was now paying the prince for it, neither Levantines nor Procerans too eager to follow the lead of a reckless Callowan general.

But the Third held, because the Third always held, and so the jaws of the trap closed.

"So now you hurt them," Akua said.

As if bid by the hand of fate, the ballistas of the Army of Callow began to sing. I saw the understanding dawn in Akua's eyes, for though she was not exactly a veteran commander she was clever and well learned in matters of warfare. The enemy had to reinforce through the pass, its entrance now stripped of all fortifications by the thorough work of Lord Soln, which meant my sappers knew exactly where the killing fields ought to be set up. The copperstone ballistas pounded the enemy into dust, again and again and again, as the flanks caught up to the Third and tore through the still ill-prepared undead brought there by the waters.

And so the enemy general slowly came to realize it had been baited into filling a box – the once-caverns, the mouth of the pass – where its numbers were being made into a disadvantage. The fighting with blades, after all, only happened between the first ranks of the dead and the living. The fire of my siege engines burned swaths behind this, and would cost Keter easily fivefold

the casualties the rest of my army would cause it. Akua stayed silent for a long moment, taking it in.

"I sometimes forget how deeply unpleasant a general you are to face," Akua mildly said.

I snorted. We'd never faced each other as commanders of armies, actually, as she'd been the general of her forces at neither the Dead Dawn or the Doom.

"An inspired trick," she continued after a moment.

Such direct praise was rare, coming from her, and I allowed myself a sliver of enjoyment before setting it aside.

"I'm hardly the first to use it," I dismissed. "Jehan the Wise did the same with the banks of the Wasaliti at the Battle of the Sparrows, and Terribilis to the Third Crusade at the Danse Macabre."

"Both being famously unskilled generals, of course," Akua amusedly replied. "What terrible company you keep."

"Battle's far from over," I grunted. "Bit early for boasting."

My eyes returned to the field as time inched forward torturously. By now, I thought as the lines held on both sides and the copperstones burned bright, the enemy general would be realizing this was not a sustainable position for them. I still hadn't sent out my reserves, the entire Second Army and nine thousand drow, and there was no sign of my running out of copperstones. On their side the horrible siege engine atop the hills did not have an angle to fire down on my troops, and if the fighting continued until after dark – which it seemed like it might – then I'd have nine thousand Firstborn to send after them.

The obvious answer would be to retreat deeper into the pass, since it restored the reason why the enemy army was at Lauzon's Hollow in the first place: being able to hold us off with the pass. I'd turned it around on them by baiting them to fight at the mouth of the pass, but they could write off what they'd committed and retreat, resuming the defence deeper in.

"Why aren't they retreating?" Akua said, putting her finger on the pulse of the question.

"Can they *afford* to?" I replied with a hard smile. "Count the corpses, Akua Sahelian."

The enemy had outnumbered us one hundred thousand to seventy thousand, when the campaign began. After the first day of fighting at the Hollow, we'd lost a little over two thousand and the dead a minimum of six thousand along with a significant

portion of their swarms. Now throw in the ten thousand or so they would have lost to the water, then maybe another ten thousand lost in the killing box over the early afternoon. Meanwhile, I'd count maybe another two to three thousand dead on our side over those same hours, which meant we'd be down to around sixty five thousand while the enemy had been brutally dragged down to mid seventy thousands. If my opponent wrote off the troops holding the mouth of the Hollow and retreated, my side might have numerical *superiority* when the assault continued deeper in.

"They overcommitted," Akua breathed out. "If they retreat now, they might no longer have the numbers to hold the Hollow against us regardless."

I turned to glance at her and caught her eye, reading there an expectation of agreement.

"Gotcha," I said. "You just lost the battle."

I enjoyed the surprise that flickered through before she suppressed it more than I had the praise earlier, so at least there was that.

"That's the deeper trap," I said. "That instinct not to sacrifice those troops anyway. I want the enemy in that killing box as long as I can possibly keep them there, Akua. It's the absolute best exchange rate of casualties I'll be able to get on this field."

Her lips thinned.

"I am used to considering troops valuable," she said. "The source of my mistake, perhaps. It will not be shared by the commander of the dead."

"Probably not," I admitted. "I expect they'll hesitate but come to the same conclusion soon enough. Which is why I told you, earlier, that my bait is in two parts."

What would convince my opposing general it was worth sticking it out in there? It'd have to be a prize worth those mounting casualties. Just the losses involved in the lizard cutting off its tail to escape wouldn't be enough to dissuade a Keteran general for long, so I'd set out fresh bait for them to bite: my left wing, the Procerans. Under Princess Beatrice's command stood only six thousand souls, fewer by now. Hardy Volignac foot, mostly, but that only counted so much in a fight like this. A wing undermanned, as Akua had earlier said. Fragile. Foolish, and I did not have a reputation for that, so even counting on the impression that this was a political decision instead of a tactical one I'd also gilded the bait by putting my entire horse contingent behind Princess Beatrice's wing.

As if expecting a breach, expecting to need buying time for my reserve the Second Army to come prop up that failing flank.

"Come on," I murmured, looking at the ranks of the dead. "Bite, my friend. You know you want to."

And I laughed, laughed until my throat hurt, when Keter fell for it again. Reinforcements kept pouring out of the pass and into my killing box, scores dying to every copperstone, and the undead sent their full wrath against the left flank.

"Akua," I said. "Pass a message for me. I want these two to prop up the left wing: Headhunter and Forsworn Healer."

"As you say, my heart," the golden-eyed shade replied, bowing.

I barely spared her a glance, my own gaze still on the battlefield. Those three should be able to prevent the Revenants I suspected the enemy was about to send from shattering the left flank. That was the bet of my opposing general, after all: that it could break the left wing and manage to collapse the increasingly exhausted Third by overwhelming its flank and back in a massive sweep rightwards. Even if I sent out my cavalry, at that point, the battle would be lost. Keter's game afterwards turn to trying to inflict as many casualties as possible while my army fled back to camp, a particular specialty of the Dead King's army. I was not unaware this could still turn south on me, though I trusted the lines would hold. If it got rough, I still had some cards to play.

Beastmaster had already gone to reinforce Archer, a deadly combination that'd allow her to kill constructs even beyond her sight, and now that the Summoner was back I was keeping him in reserve with the brew I'd had Concocter working on. The remaining swarms had yet to be unleashed: most likely my opponent was keeping them back, since they'd be brutally efficient at turning a break in my lines into a rout if they were properly employed. When Hakram wheeled his way to my side, I held in a wince. Not because I was unhappy to see him, but because if he'd come to deliver the news personally they wouldn't be good.

"Beastmaster's dead," Adjutant told me, blunt and to the point. "The Pale Knight slid behind the lines."

My fingers clenched.

"Indrani?"

"Broken army, already fixed," Hakram said. "The Silver Huntress' band reappeared just in time to drive him away, no further Named casualties."

"Fuck," I murmured. "Too close."

"Orders for the Huntress?" he asked.

"None," I said. "She's free to follow providence and judgement as she pleases."

That was the main reason I'd sent out a band of five *heroes*, after all. Some villains would have better rounded out their band, but it would have diluted the effect of providence. Best to have an imperfect force at the perfect time and place than the opposite. Hakram stayed at my side afterwards, letting his helping hands carry the rest. We stayed silent, but not uncomfortably so. We both had our minds on the field in the distance. Not long after, to my surprise the Dominion began pushing into the undead lines ahead of them. They were fresher than either my Third or the Procerans, admittedly, and significantly more numerous. I'd genuinely not expected they would, though, so I was unprepared when the enemy general decided to set them back with a decisive stroke.

The swarms came loose from the broke ceiling of the caverns, coming down as screeching tide as the binders did their best to keep them at bay.

"Summoner and Concocter," I curtly ordered Hakram.

The messenger was moving before I was even done speaking. I'd positioned them closer to the left flank, expecting the strike would come there, so my fingers were raking the arms of my seat while the two silhouettes on wyvernback went up from too far away as the first ranks of the Dominion were engulfed and shredded. It got handled, in the end, but not quickly enough. The dead pushed hard into the Malaga section of the shield wall simultaneously to the swarm assault and it would have turned into a rout without what I suspected to be Named intervention. Couldn't be sure at this distance, not with armies so large and the constant streaks of Light and sorcery.

The next helping hand that came to report to Hakram was Scribe, which told me there were grimmer news yet.

"The Sage stabilized the break in the Levantine line," Scribe told us.

"And?" Adjutant gravelled.

"The moment after the shield wall closed up, he was sniped by an archer Revenant," Scribe told us. "I believe he might have used his three aspects over the afternoon's fighting, and become vulnerable as a result."

"Tell me they recovered the corpse," I said.

"Lady Aquiline Osenia saw to it personally," Eudokia said.

I blew out a breath. It could have been worse. There weren't clean victories outside the stories, I reminded myself, and stuck the course. When the Proceran flank began wavering despite the best efforts of Beatrice Volignac and the desperately fighting Named there – the Headhunter slew two Revenants and claimed their heads, according to the reports Hakram received – I did not panic or send orders to my cavalry. Instead I smiled and sent for Senior Mage Jendayi, Hune's senior spellcaster.

"Send word to Lady Catalina to prepare for the crossing," I ordered. "We are nearing our moment."

This very afternoon, after all, was when the detachments we'd sent out were due to return. Instead of letting them come openly across the plains, I'd instead requested for Ivah and the fantassins under Lady Catalina to take the Twilight Ways – I could, that way, unleash them as a surprise when the time came. Keter would have accounted for our own mages, there was no hiding them, but not for those that'd left with our detachments. I could, because of this, bet on surprise with good odds. It'd help with Proceran morale as well to be pulled out of the fire not by foreigners but by their own kind. After the battering they'd take today, it would do them some good.

When the first fantassin company on the left flank broke, I immediately gave the order for the reinforcements to begin crossing into Creation. I jolted in surprise, though, when the Third Army's shields winked out and they began shaping offensive magics instead. Wait, had General Abigail guessed my plan? I studied the Third's movements carefully, noting the massing of heavy companies around the standard, and decided that she hadn't. The gates were just now beginning to open, after all, to the cheering of the Procerans behind them. More likely she'd been worried about the left flank collapsing on her and acted to cut off the threat at the source. I chuckled.

Regardless of her intentions, the timing for that charge was actually perfect: I'd gotten what I could out of my soldiers for the day, it was time to wrap this up.

"Send word to Summoner to pull back from the right flank and help with the charge instead," I told Hakram.

"Cut loose Apprentice as well," he suggested. "She'll thank you for it."

I mulled over that a moment then nodded. He was by my side and deep behind our lines, and while there might not be such a thing as *safe* when fighting Keter he was not at so great a risk he could not spare his bodyguard and assistant for a bit. I settled back into my seat, watching the last few exchanges of the day unfold. It went better than I'd dared hope, in truth. The enemy centre, while steadily reinforced over the afternoon, had also

steadily been culled by hours of copperstone bombardment. I'd not anticipated that would mean it was thin on Binds – they'd need more Light to be destroyed, if anything – but that was the only explanation that came to mind as to why the undead centre shattered like a rotten egg when the Third charged into it.

I watched the enemy ranks break apart under weight of the heavy companies and almost asked Jendayi to send a signal for General Abigail to pull back, for she was getting too far ahead, but she stopped on her own anyway. Good, I thought. I'd kept the Grey Legion out of this so far by making the ground muddy and so effectively making it impossible for infantry that heavy to accomplish anything save get stuck in a mire, but there were drier grounds further in. I had a lot of faith in the Third Army, but there was a reason the standard order for mundane troops encountering the Grey Legion was 'retreat'. General Hune, sensing like me that the battle was coming to a close, came my way. She made her courtesies to myself and Hakram, then got into why she'd come here.

"Congratulations are in order, Your Majesty," the ogre said. "Another victory to your name."

I didn't disagree, even though there was still fighting on the field. With the Third having claimed the head of the narrowing in the pass, enemy reinforcements were cut off so the left and right wings were just pushing up pockets of undead against the walls of the caverns and systematically exterminating them. It'd take a while, and the Third would have to hold until they were done, but with the amount of Named we had on the field we should be able to deal with any nasty surprise the enemy had left to unleash. All that was left was for someone to sabotage the enemy's siege engine on the hills before we could retreat, which I was already mulling sending word to the Silver Huntress' band to do.

A moment later there was a great burst of Light in the distance atop the hills, followed by pillars of flame, and I was once more reminded that the Heavens had a sharp sense of humour.

"It's only half the battle," I finally replied. "We still don't hold the Hollow itself."

"Given Keter's casualties today, and the raiding the Firstborn will no doubt undertake tonight, there can be no question of the dead still holding the pass by tomorrow afternoon," General Hune said. "The last swordstroke has not been granted, but it is a victory all the same."

We'd be out raiding in force overnight, and with the full strength of the drow: nearly twenty thousand, including several hard-hitting Mighty. I fully intended on savaging the enemy army as brutally as I could before dawn came and the fighting resumed tomorrow.

"We'll see it if pans out that neatly," I replied, "but I take the congratulations in the spirit they were meant, regardless. Thank you, General Hune."

She didn't linger after that, leaving us to our thoughts. I watched the last gasps of the battle far away without truly looking at them. Hakram cleared his throat.

"You look worried," he said.

"I am," I admitted. "Something about this smells off to me."

"It was a hard-fought battle, even if it went well for us," Adjutant said. "It is not *always* a trap, Catherine."

"Then where has the Grey Legion been?" I quietly asked. "The mud kept them out, but halfway into the battle Keter should have spit out a ritual that steadied the ground so they could fight."

Mighty Sudone had slaughtered a great many of Keter's magelings, but not so many that they would not have been able to deliver that particular 'surprise'. I'd had an answer waiting for it, admittedly, but with no certainty it'd work. They'd never come out at all, though, which had my fingers clenching and unclenching.

"Has anyone seen the Prince of Bones?" I suddenly asked. "We've seen the Grey Legion yes, but the Prince himself?"

Hakram paused a moment.

"I'll find out," he promised.

"Do," I muttered.

I closed my eyes. I was missing something, I could feel it. Roland had reported seeing a Crab, a while back, I suddenly recalled. Something to do with that, perhaps? I couldn't see any obvious links, though.

"It's not that I don't think this isn't a victory," I said. "But there will be more to this, Hakram. We're not dealing an amateur, Neshamah plans for both outcomes. He'll have gotten something out of even a defeat."

He had no answer to that, and so I left him to his work. By sundown I had estimated casualties for both sides of the battle, rough as they were. My armies had around eight thousand dead and maybe another thousand crippled beyond the current ability of our priests and mages to repair. That took us to an army fifty nine thousand strong, perhaps even a little lower. The enemy, though? Keter had begun holding Lauzon's Hollow with an army of one hundred thousand, and now it had barely half that: fifty to fifty five thousand left, we believed, though the Grey Legion counted

among them. My soldiers had, without even our full army being on the field, fought like lions and won the day. A heroic victory, some would call it.

Now we just needed to win another hundred, and never lose.

Welcome to war with Keter.

Chapter 60: Zwischenschach

"In war and politics, we are all as men sharing the same dark cave and stumbling along blindly. The keys to victory in either matter are patience and seeing just a little further ahead than your opponents."

– Luc Monseiller, thirty-second First Prince of Procer, largely remembered for the Great War that followed his assassination

A brawl. The last blows of the battle not even an hour past, and now they were *brawling*.

Sometimes I sympathized with Cordelia Hasenbach, for though I had fought her tooth and nail to keep the Truce and Terms from being beyond the reach of temporal laws I didn't entirely disagree with her when it came down to it. I bent the rules for Named all the time, didn't I? I'd made them beyond the authority of all but two of their own kind, allowed them to wield power over others and invested them with weighty responsibilities. But sometimes, Gods sometimes, they just went and did something that made it feel like I was biting down on a mouthful of embers. I knew the names and the Names, could discern the source of this stupidity, but to understand was not to excuse.

If they'd been soldiers under my command, this would end with a flogging and a demotion. If it had been allied officers, even nobles, I would have had them removed from command and sent away. But Names were rarer than noble blood, the power they gave more highly prized than titles in these days where the end times were howling at our door, so instead I would have to be *lenient*. To chide and discipline, as if dealing with children instead of hardened killers empowered by Creation. What hope was there for the Liesse Accords, when not even the Dead King at our gates was enough to force reason onto us?

I wrestled my mounting fury down as I limped through the dusty grounds of our camp, knowing calm would serve me better. It was exhaustion and anger talking, I told myself. There would be good days and bad ones in the era to come and no treaty could change that. It'd never been their purpose to fix the world, for that was too ambitious a charge for anything made by my hand. The Accords would do what they were meant to, and Calernia would

muddle along with a few less atrocities splattered across the pages of its history. That alone would already be a better legacy than I had any right to claim, some would say.

In the distance, as I turned a corner, I heard cheering. The Night boiled in my veins, answering the livid streak of anger that seized me, and the closest legionaries shivered. I'd sent for a full company of armed soldiers, phalanges one and all, to accompany me. They were to serve as either escort or mailed fist, depending on my orders, and my mood was feeling more and more like clenching fingers. The cheering itself wasn't bad, it was what it meant: that Named had decided to fucking brawl in public in front of any soldier that cared to watch. On the same day as a bruising battle with the Kingdom of the Dead, our corpses not even all burned. My fingers *clenched*.

Well, at least one was going to be one of mine so maybe flogging wasn't off the table yet.

It was with that hard stomp particular to soldiers meaning business that my company entered the picture. A large crowd of soldiers – a few hundred, a thousand? – had gathered in a great ring. By their looks and armour they were from half a dozen different armies and oaths, a clean slice of our coalition shouting hoarsely as five Named brawled and coin changed hands. A quiet fell in the immediate surroundings of the phalanges, soldiers paling and hastily getting out of the way of authority having come to call. There was just enough of a quiet I finally made out one particular thread from the cacophony. An old ditty I'd learned as kid in Laure, beautifully sung by a cold-blooded monster.

"Maiden Mary, fair and merry

Your tears make poets sigh

But for a smile given sweetly

Tall banners will kiss the sky."

The Rapacious Troubadour had a nasty sense of humour, it seemed. 'Maiden Mary' was a children's song, but it dated back to the War of the Cousins – the civil war that'd put on the throne the same branch of House Fairfax that my father had later ended – and the Mary in question was Mary the Claimant. Queen Mary the Third, most scholars called her, as her Eastern Bells had won over the Southern Bells just long enough for her toddler son to die a crowned king and another cousin succeed him. I would have been impressed about the Troubadour knowing the song at all, if he'd not also been the same shit playing a song about civil war while Named fought in front of a crowd of rowdy soldiers.

There was blood on the floor, I saw, but at least no one was dead yet. Archer and the Silver Huntress were both bleeding, and I knew the look in Indrani's eyes – she'd take a killing stroke without hesitation if she got the opportunity. The Silent Guardian and the Headhunter were both in better shape, the Guardian having nothing but marks on her plate while the Headhunter had suffered only a small cut on their cheek. The only voice of sanity in there was Roland, even now trying to force everyone apart and largely failing.

"- settles nothing," I caught the Rogue Sorcerer saying. "You are only making it worse for-"

"Do it to 'em, Lady Archer," someone with a heavy Liessen accent shouted. "Callow! The Sword and Crown!"

"Huntress," an Alamans accent shouted back. "For grace and Heavens, Silver Huntress!"

The crowd roared, the crowd cheered, and the Rapacious Troubadour was still playing that *fucking* song.

"Maiden Mary, bright and lovely

What groom did you embrace?

Hand in hand, wooing roughly

Your troth is kingdom's grace."

Enough was enough. The mood might still be more joyous than bloody at the moment, but crowds were mercurial beasts – this could turn sour very, very quickly. I was still damned winded from the gates Akua and I had opened, but not so spent I couldn't muster a resounding thunderclap when I struck the ground with the butt of my staff. The clap rolled across the ring, drowning out even the cheers, and I limped forward as the phalanges roughly shoved aside the few onlookers and gambled still in my way.

"Disperse," I said, voice cold as steel. "Now, and I will not bother with arrests."

A shiver went through the crowd, though my eye was on the fighting Named – which had ceased actively trying to stab each other, but were still close and holding weapons – and the mood was doused rather comprehensively. I'd half-expected someone to protest and to have to make an example, but instead already the edges of the crowd were fraying as people made quiet escapes. Like a crumbling stone, the whole ring would fall apart before long. There was a flicker of remembrance, just as the edge of my mind, as I recalled when I'd been a slip of a girl in Laure and I'd watched Black empty a hall's worth of lords with but a

handful of words. I'd sworn, that evening, that one day I'd have that power too.

It had taken years, but I'd gotten there. I wondered, though, what that wary wild girl from the orphanage would think of the woman I'd grown into. I thinly smiled, knowing that she might well have added me to the list of monsters in need of killing.

"Queen Catherine," Roland started, "this is-"

"Utter stupidity," I mildly said. "But your role in it was minor and well-meant. Walk back to your tent, Rogue Sorcerer."

He caught my eyes, for a moment, and whatever it was he saw there it told him not to argue. My gaze lingered long enough to acknowledge his bow, then moved to the four remaining Named. I couldn't see the Silent Guardian's face under her helmet, but her stance was sheepish. As for the Headhunter, they – no, he if I understood the face paint correctly – looked rather unapologetic and entirely unembarrassed. *He had an excuse for butting in, then*, I decided. Which left the two who would have been the spark for the entire mess. Archer and the Silver Huntress.

"Who struck first?" I asked.

"She did," the Huntress said, her high-pitched voice grown shrill with anger.

"I scored first blood," Indrani dismissed. "You swung at me first, Alexis."

"That is true," the Headhunter jeered. "On both counts. And the Guardian couldn't resist backing up her friend, could she? Hardly sporting, two on one."

My gaze returned to Silent Guardian, who took off her helm and revealed a tanned and dark-haired head. While she looked like she rather wanted to smash in the Headhunter's skull, to me she bowed in apology.

"You only intervened after blood was drawn?" I clarified.

She nodded. I hummed, eyeing the Headhunter.

"And you intervened out of your abiding love for fairness, I take it?" I mused.

"You have me pegged," the Headhunter grinned.

"You tried to stab me in the back, you-"

The word the Huntress used was in tradertalk, but by the tone it wasn't a compliment.

"You're both dismissed," I said, ignoring the Huntress. "For having participated in a brawl, you're both docked pay for five months and you'll be assigned menial work under an officer of my choosing."

The Headhunter glared at me, opening his mouth, but his gaze dipped to my side – where my fingers, without my notice, had taken to clenching and unclenching. His mouth closed.

"Dismissed," I coldly repeated.

The Silent Guardian offered a bow first, which I returned with a nod. The Headhunter did not go quite as politely, elbowing some of the last remaining soldiers in his way as he went. Of the Rapacious Troubadour there was no sign, I noted. The clever little shit had made good on his escape before I could rap his knuckles. Indrani and the Huntress were still facing each other weapons in hand, long knives for Archer and the spear for her old acquaintance. I cocked an eyebrow.

"Is there a particular reason you two are still holding weapons?" I mildly asked.

I saw Indrani suppress a wince. She knew better than the Huntress that particular tone of voice did not herald a good mood on my part.

"If she puts away her blades," the Silver Huntress began, "I will-"

"If I must make it an order, Alexis the Argent," I lightly interrupted, "I might just lose my temper and fucking drum the two of you of this army before the eyes of gods and men."

With a quiet sliding sound, Indrani's long knives went back into the sheaths. I turned a dark eye on her: she'd timed that, I knew, just so that the Huntress would look like a recalcitrant malcontent and she the obedient subordinate. Unlucky for her, I wasn't buying it. The Silver Huntress blinked in discomfort, then reluctantly stabbed her spear into the ground. She folded her arms over her chest, looking rather defensive.

"I'm going to ask you two questions," I said. "You will reply to them calmly and concisely, without interrupting each other."

I got nod. Indrani's almost playful, as if it were set in stone she'd get out of this without losing any feathers. My irritation spiked.

"Huntress, why did you attack an ally?" I bluntly asked.

She grimaced, though I'd wager more from the phrasing than remembrance of the punch thrown. The Lady of the Lake had not raised those girls to shame easily.

"She got Lysander killed," Alexis the Argent harshly said. "Same old story: Indrani has a lark and one of us bleeds for it. Only this time it didn't stop with *bleeding*."

The anger in her voice was a hard, cold thing. I found the hate threaded in it unsettling, as it was too strong to be a fresh – this was an old poison, just brought to the fore with a fresh wound.

"I assigned her to the Third Army myself," I evenly said. "And by the reports I've read, she fulfilled her duties admirably. As for the death of Beastmaster, I understand she fought and had an arm broken trying to prevent it."

The Silver Huntress' eyes hardened, turning to Archer.

"Ranger, Black Queen, it makes no difference," Alexis bitterly said. "You'll always find skirts to hide behind, won't you?"

"Say that again," Indrani hissed, hand going for a knife.

"Watch your tongue, Huntress," I sharply said. "And Archer, I ordered you not to interrupt. Don't make me repeat myself again."

She looked mulish but did not argue. She'd been more interested in protecting her pride than my 'honour' there, I thought, so my sympathy was limited. I felt a faint breeze against my neck, gone in a moment, but did not let it distract me.

"Archer," I said. "You were struck with a fist. Why did you answer it with a knife?"

Indrani's lips thinned.

"I was insulted beyond reasonable expectation of restraint," she said.

"You lying-" Huntress began.

My anger, never far, burned cold and sharp as once more an order I'd given within my rights was disobeyed. This, this I was done tolerating. The breeze came back, but it'd never been a breeze at all: it was a breath. Warm, coming through an open maw.

"Be silent," I Spoke.

The Silver Huntress fought it. But as the Beast leaned over my shoulder, hacking out a laugh, even as she struggled her mouth snapped shut. I felt a vicious twinge of satisfaction that I did

not indulge, but did not ignore. Archer's face was slack with surprise.

"The two of you are damned disgraces," I said. "On the same day where thousands fought and died turning back the Enemy, you attacked each other like drunken bulls before we'd even finished burning the corpses. *Shame on you both.*"

Indrani reared back like I'd slapped her. With a twist of will, I peeled back the order I'd Spoken at the Huntress. Her lips parted and she breathed out in pants.

"Huntress, you are no longer commander for the heroes in this army," I said. "The Rogue Sorcerer, who tried to put an end to this bout of idiocy, will take your place. The White Knight will handle the rest of your disciplining. I offer him this as a courtesy, but should you break the Truce again I will have no choice but to cease being polite."

My eyes moved to the other offender.

"Your pay is docked for this entire campaign," I told Archer. "You are not to speak with any hero outside of official duties without the explicit permission of the Rogue Sorcerer or myself. If you draw a blade on an ally again, I'll send you south like the child you insist on acting as."

Her hands clenched, but she stayed silent.

"You've also lost the right to refuse assignments for six months," I finally said. "You'll be accompanying the Firstborn on the raid tonight, so return to your tent and prepare."

Both of them glared at me sullenly, in that heartbeat eerily resembling each other for all their starkly different appearances. Grief was a bitter brew, I knew that better than most, and they were both fresh off the death of someone they'd cared for in a very complicated way. I understood why it'd come to this, I really did. But I was also a high officer of the Grand Alliance, sworn to enforce the Truce and Terms – which they had just broken in a spectacularly public and untimely manner. My duty was clear, and my anger not faked in the slightest. I stared them both down until they left, not bothering with a proper dismissal. The moment they left the Beast brushed against my shoulder, almost affectionately, and without a single lingering wisp it was gone.

I could Speak again, I knew. It hadn't been a fluke. I could feel the way my will once more struck against Creation like a queen's decree. *One step closer*, I thought, and breathed out. To what I did not yet know, but the shape I was beginning to discern was not unpleasant to my eye.

—

"Bleed them," I ordered the Firstborn. "Under this moon, your only mandate is the reaping of deaths."

With nightfall had come our opportunity to savage the Dead King's forces badly enough that tomorrow's fighting would be the final stroke of annihilation. The Twilight Ways would allow the drow to harass the enemy's camp on the other side of the pass from every direction, all the while staying out of the jaws of the trap that'd been sprung on us the previous night: here would be no wards to keep us penned in, this time. Only skirmishes in the manner that'd been the lifeblood of the Everdark for a millennium, perhaps the only manner of war in which the Firstborn could be said to be the most accomplished of all Calernian peoples. And out the sigils went, under the command of Ivah and its subordinate sigil-holders.

We went with them, a band of Named under my own lead. Archer, naturally, for I meant to keep her out of trouble and the camp for a span. To some a place in such a raid was considered a prize and so I awarded it accordingly: the Vagrant Spear came with us and the Headhunter as well. Roland I'd dragged along mostly on account of his expertise in breaking magics, knowing it was never wise to bet on Keter not having that one last trick up its sleeve. The choices had also been a balancing act, which naturally some noticed.

"I'm sure it's just a coincidence," Archer sardonically murmured, "that your picks are even on both sides of the fence. Ever the diplomat, eh?"

It was not an approving tone. Even the band was a good one, well-fitted, I suspected that in her eyes politics having had a say in making it tainted it irremediably.

"Are you complaining I'm calming waters you helped unsettle?" I replied.

"I didn't pick that fight," Indrani told me flatly.

"You still fought it," I said. "You could have taken the lump, walked away."

Her face tightened with genuine anger.

"I don't owe you that," she said. "I don't owe *anyone* that."

"Then spare me the comments," I curtly replied. "I'll take shit for you, Indrani, but I won't take it *from* you as well. If you want to talk of things owed, best remember that."

Not the most pleasant exchanges to precede going into battle, though only Roland seemed to notice the tension between us as we sidled through the Twilight Ways. He did not ask, that very Alamans instinct for discerning when a question would not be well-received sparing me the irritation of having to offer even a cursory explanation. Before long we were back in Creation, anyhow, and the raid claimed everyone's full attention. I'd left the command in Ivah's hand, knowing my Lord of Silent Steps was perfectly capable of leading sigils in war without my breathing down its neck, so I had the freedom to pick where I wanted to meddle. I had some thoughts already.

I rather itched to get rid of the Pale Knight, if it could be done without paying a ruinous price.

That plan went the way of dust, though, the moment we emerged from the Ways and found that the enemy was *retreating*. The pass was still in the hands of undead forces, and if anything the northern end of the passage was more heavily defended than before, but we'd come out to the north of the enemy's camp – in the flat plains between Lauzon's Hollow and the Cigelin Sisters – so it was impossible to miss that there were departing columns. I sharpened my eyes with Night, seeking numbers. Maybe ten to twenty thousand massed to hold the pass in case we struck overnight, but the rest were mobilizing to leave. Hells, there were already scouting detachments north of us in the distance.

"Leaving?" the Headhunter sneered. "Fools. We'll catch up through the Ways."

She – it was she, tonight – would have been right if our soldiers were things of stone instead of flesh and blood, but it wasn't the case.

"I'm not sure we can," the Rogue Sorcerer replied. "Not after today's battle."

One of these days, I was going to have to ask Roland exactly what kind of an upbringing had forged a man like him. He was surprisingly well learned in a variety of subjects, including quite a few that mages in the Praesi mold would have considered beneath their notice.

"He's right," I said. "Our army's fit to battle, tomorrow, but not to march."

Practically speaking parts of the army would be – the Second Army and the Proceran detachments freshly returned, as well as a healthy chunk of the Dominion's warriors – but it'd be risky to engage in pursuit with low numbers and it'd leave the force behind us very vulnerable. Unlike us, though, the Dead King did not have to give a shit about wounded or exhaustion or supplies. He could just order the march. There were three days between the

Sisters and Lauzon's Hollow, so if we took a day to recuperate and immediately marched maybe we'd arrive at the Sisters before he did. *Maybe*. But it'd be risky. If the Cigelin Sisters had been reinforced, we might end up walking into a positional disaster.

"Then what is to be our purpose this night, Black Queen?" the Vagrant Spear asked.

I chewed on my lip. I wasn't comfortable risking a night battle with Keter, even assuming I could muster enough of my army to wage one alongside the Firstborn. That left only one logical move.

"We'll not be hunting Revenants, after all," I said. "Damage is our purpose. We thin their numbers as much as we can – Binds over Bones, constructs over anything else. We avoid Revenants unless they're alone and keep close as a band. Understood?"

Archer, even after our terse exchange, remained entirely dependable.

"Understood," Indrani replied, stringing her bow.

"We hunt," the Vagrant Spear agreed.

Roland sighed, offering a nod, and the Headhunter rolled her eyes.

"I'll take a kill if it's offered," she insisted.

"By all means," I mildly replied. "Though if you disobey my order I will, naturally, discipline you accordingly."

The Levantine villain met my eyes and I smiled thinly. I'd killed harder women than her, and without too much trouble. After a moment she nodded.

"Good," I said. "Let's get to it, then."

It'd be a stretch to say that what followed was boring – the danger might be limited, but it still existed – but it did get... repetitive. And it was dull from the start. Moving on foot we struck hard at the enemy's columns, targeting Binds and the occasional constructs or supplies before retreating back into the Twilight ways and popping out elsewhere. We were quick enough no Revenants came even close to approaching us, though part of that must have been from the Firstborn being a larger and significantly more damaging threat. We saw, maybe two hours in, that things were actually turning starkly in favour of the drow.

Mighty were burning entire swaths of the enemy with impunity and casualties were mounting among the dead with only paltry costs to the Firstborn. Some of the sigils got too bold, though, it cost them. Revenants, at first, but the struck sigil doubled down and

called allies – only for the Grey Legion finally to make an appearance. It was a major enough development that I parted ways from my band temporarily and called a sigil-holder to me for a report. Lord Soln bowed deep, but talked briskly. It wanted to return to the fray.

“The ironclads unmake the Night, Losara Queen, much as the carved pillars did during our previous raid,” Lord Soln said. “It appears they have also been invested with a ward that prevents access to the Twilight Ways. That surprise was... costly. Between them and the Revenants, we were forced to pull back.”

“Give me a look,” I ordered, extending a hand.

The sphere of Night was promptly offered and my damning suspicions were confirmed. I’d seen the Grey Legion before, those hulking dead encased in armour so thick it more of a rampart. Those armours had been well-maintained and quite distinctive, so it was easy to tell that the Grey Legion had been quite recently refitted. *So that’s what you got out of this, Neshamah, I thought. You tested the pillars and wards on our Firstborn, and when they proved effective you used that Crab lurking around somewhere to refit your Grey Legion into drow-killers.* It wouldn’t matter much here, where we could harass away from their ranks and avoid them, but there would come a time in this campaign when the drow would have to stand and fight.

And when they did, the Prince of Bones and his legion tailored to kill Firstborn would be waiting for them.

“Go,” I told Soln. “Return to the fight. Pass my order that the Grey Legion is to be avoided, lest we allow the enemy to further refine ways to kill us.”

It was worse than those troops just being a hard counter to drow, I knew. It also meant that two of the three assets we had at hand that could possibly deal with the Grey Legion without horrendous casualties – namely Akua and myself – had just been made equally obsolete. Some tricks would work to a limited extent, like flood gates, but I wasn’t confident in smashing them by myself anymore. And our last answer to their kind, the Blessed Artificer, worked exclusively in Light. I was not so confident that the Dead King did not have something to counteract that as well, considering how much he’d invested in building up this army. *Fuck.*

Unpleasant as the revelation was, there was nothing to do but to continue our raiding. I returned to my band and we resumed our attacks, continuing to inflict bloody noses wherever we went until around Early Bell. We were all beginning to slow, close calls were getting closer and victories getting sloppier, so I called it at an end. The Firstborn remained until a full hour before dawn, only then retreating into the Twilight Ways. I slept for as long as I dared, which wasn’t much, and woke all too soon

to be presented with corpses. Named and Revenants, this time. I took two aspects from the Beastmaster before it grew unfeasible to do more, but unfortunately I did not have the rights to the Sage's body.

The way the Headhunter took heads from the foes they defeated fucked with my ability to steal aspects, I discovered with displeasure after a very frustrating hour pawing at Revenants fruitlessly, but I still got two out of the kill the Vagrant Spear had made. Disappointingly weak, those two, but I was never one to sneer at having another artefact up my sleeve. When the war council held session afterwards, once more with the full roster, there was no real disagreement over the decisions to be made. The morning's scouting parties had found Lauzon's Hollow abandoned, so we'd send out Named to smell out the traps no doubt left behind and after them a forward force to hold the end of the pass.

The full army would only begin moving tomorrow at dawn, when we took to the Twilight Ways in an attempt to catch up to the enemy. If we were lucky, our surprise strike would seize the Cigelin Sisters before the enemy arrived and we'd be able to pincer the Dead King between the fortress and our field army. If not, we'd have to get... inventive. There were still too many unknowns for a proper battle plan to be made, unfortunately.

There was a bit of a commotion before Noon Bell when the Gigantes delegation finally caught up to us, but the giants were polite and it did wonders for morale. I was sent a polite yet firm reminder that the Gigantes would not fight unless attacked, and could not be used as war casters by my order, but I had no qualms with that. Just as ward-makers they'd be worth a dozen times their weight in gold, which would be no small sum. The Gigantes, though, had been largely expected. I'd known they were coming from the messages received from Neustal. When there was once more a commotion at a sudden appearance though, it came as a genuine surprise to me. I figured it might have been an early supply convoy, at first, but Hakram swiftly send a phalange to inform me otherwise.

It was Scribe herself who escorted the surprise arrival into my tent, helping him into the chair with surprising gentleness. I dismissed her with a look afterwards – Hakam I'd trust with such a conversation, but she was not Hakram.

"Catherine," the Grey Pilgrim greeted me tiredly.

Tariq looked a month past exhausted and all too frail even for a man of his age, which did not bode well. He was also supposed to be with Prince Klaus' army, which boded *significantly* worse.

"Tariq," I quietly replied. "Can I offer you a drink?"

I did not bother to ask if something had gone wrong, for he'd not be here otherwise. To my surprise, he took me up on my offer.

"Something stiff," Tariq Fleetfoot asked. "It will keep me awake long enough to get through this conversation, at least. I've not slept in weeks."

I silently revised my estimate of the trouble from 'pretty bad' to 'fuck' as I poured him a full glass of brandy and pressed it into his hand. He drank deep and offered thanks.

"We finally learned why the army in Juvelun did not chase us when we marched past it towards Malmedit," the Grey Pilgrim told me.

"Did you," I said, already grimacing.

"We also found that missing army of two hundred thousand," the Peregrine mirthlessly smiled. "It was, after all, waiting for us in the latter city."

Chapter 61: Adouber

"Fear is the prerequisite to any genuine learning; anything that can be learnt without questioning the foundations of your world is essentially decorative."

– Dread Emperor Sorcerous

It was easy to forget that the Grey Pilgrim was, for all the power of his Name and the favour of the Ophanim, very much mortal. An old man with an old man's frailties, whose relentless march towards my camp had brought to the brink of collapse. His loose grey robes looked half made of dust and even drabber than usual, his rheumy blue were clouded with exhaustion. It made me uncomfortable to look at, someone of that strength so openly at the end of their rope. His brandy was sipped at carefully and he declined my offer of sending for a warm meal, claiming that exhausted as he was he'd probably retch it right out. After gathering his bearings some, the Peregrine needed no prompting to begin speaking.

"The campaign went well, at first," Tariq said. "The Enemy's raids were heavy and sustained, but we held strong through the days and the nights belonged to the Firstborn."

I'd poured myself a cup of brandy as well before dropping back into my seat. I had a feeling I was going to need a stiff drink before this conversation came to an end, and maybe second when it had.

"The last messenger I got from your column told me the army was preparing to pass Juvelun," I said.

The Iron Prince's part of the campaign plan had been relatively straightforward, when it came down to it. His smaller column – fifty-four thousand to my seventy – had left days earlier than mine from one of our defensive strongholds to the east of Neustal, just north of the town of Cassain. It'd then quickly advanced north along the old mining roads. Our intention had been for Prince Klaus' army to draw the undead army at the town of Juvelun into battle, as the town sat over a passage through the hills towards the central valley where the capital lay, the army holding it also being the undead force closest to said capital.

Unfortunately the army in question had refused to leave Juvelun, instead remaining in a dug-in and defensible position that it would be difficult for Prince Klaus' numerically inferior army to invest. We'd anticipated that was a possibility, though, and planned accordingly. To the north, further up the mining road, lay the city of Malmedit. To the Dead King it was a place of some strategic importance, as the mine shafts surrounding the city had been connected to tunnels he'd had dug through the northern hills and he now used Malmedit as a major staging area to pour warbands into the lowlands of Hainaut.

If the Iron Prince made it to Malmedit he could collapse the tunnels, which would be a significant setback for Keter. Knowing that, our working assumption had been that if Prince Klaus' army kept marching north towards the city the undead army in Juvelun would *have* to engage him: the Dead King would just be pissing away his eastern road into Hainaut otherwise. Yet we had, it seemed, made a grievous mistake along the way.

"The plan seemed a success for the first few days of the march on Malmedit," the Peregrine said. "Raiding parties began harassing our supply lines, and though young Hanno kept them open sword in hand our generals believed this to be the prelude to an enemy attack against our back."

The old man paused, pressing down an errant tuft of white hair from the sparse crown around his head and sipping at his brandy.

"Yet the days passed," the Grey Pilgrim said, "and that attack failed to take place."

I grimaced. That'd be the point where I would have smelled a trap, so I refused to believe that a commander as experienced as the Prince of Hannover had not.

"I'm guessing he ordered a heavy war party forward as reconnaissance," I said.

Suspicious as he would be, Prince Klaus wouldn't have turned back at the first suspicion. The Dead King could have been bluffing, or simply writing off Malmedit as a lost cause while focusing his attention elsewhere. In his place I would have encamped

relatively close to the force I *knew* I could handle in a pitched battle – the Juvelun army – and sent out a strong contingent to probe the enemy's defenses ahead.

"Six thousand horse," Tariq agreed. "With the Witch of the Woods as magical muscle and two champions to escort her. One day shy of Malmedit itself they ran into the enemy's own vanguard."

I drank from my cup, fingers tight around the silver. With horses and that calibre of sorcery on their side, they would have gotten away mostly clean. It was the strategic situation being described that had me aghast. The Grey Pilgrim had earlier intimated that the army two hundred thousand we'd thought in the far north of the principality had been the one waiting for our eastern column in Malmedit, which meant pressing an attack forward against it would have been suicide. The Iron Prince would suddenly have found himself stuck between a massive force to the north and a smaller one to the southwest, the latter even being able to cut his supply lines if it was willing to bleed for it – and when was Keter ever unwilling to bleed?

"How bad was it?" I grimly asked.

"Even using the Twilight Ways, the war party only returned quickly enough to give us two days of forewarning," the old man said.

Which sounded like a lot, if you'd never commanded an army. But I had and so I knew they were ungainly, lumbering things. Especially when being made to turn around.

"You retreated, I assume," I slowly said.

"That was our intent," Tariq said. "Until the Young Slayer and the Harrowed Witch found an enemy raiding party to our south yet strangely heading away from the army, further south. They followed it down and–"

My eyes narrowed. The pieces were falling into place.

"– found the dead dismantling the mining road," I finished quietly.

The old man nodded. So that'd been Neshamah's game: by ripping up the road, he was making sure that even if the Iron Prince's army tried to march back to our defensive lines it'd be slowed enough that his large ambush army marching south from Malmedit would be able to catch up to it. That left only the Twilight Ways as a way out, but even that was... risky. Not on a tactical level, I meant. With two days of warning, an evacuation would be quite possible: so long as he wasn't under attack, with a pharos device Prince Klaus should be able to shift his entire army into the Ways in a

few hours. On a strategic level, though, his disappearance could lead to a disaster.

If the Iron Prince bailed on the eastern theatre of our campaign entirely, there would be nothing standing between a massive army of two hundred thousand – maybe even three hundred thousand, if the army in Juvelun joined forces when it passed near – and our dangerously bare defensive lines. Our reserve was already marching on the Cigelin Sisters, meaning all that was left there was the reinforcements from Daoine under Vivienne and a fresh wave of Proceran conscripts. Klaus could instead take his army back to our defensive lines, but if he did then he was leaving my column out to hang: all enemy armies would converge on my army and even with the Ways there was no possible way for him to reinforce me in time.

He read us like a book, I admitted to myself. The Dead King had seen us coming and now we were being made to bleed for it. I couldn't even claim that at least that fucking surprise army in Malmedit had flushed out Keter's hidden hand: we'd found *that* missing force, sure, but only after the *other* force of one hundred and fifty thousand in Luciennerie had vanished into thin air. The wily old monster had managed to keep the story of his 'hidden threat' going even after revealing another hidden threat – he'd baked a second cake while eating the first one, so he quite literally got to eat his cake and have it too. Gods but I hated fighting the fucking Dead King.

Tariq had kept silently sipping at his drink, letting me wrestle my thoughts into place, but when he saw my attention fully return to him he set the cup down.

"And after?" I simply asked.

I'd been able to make decent guesses as to what the Iron Prince would have done until then, with the benefit of multiple sources of information and insight, but now we were out in the wilds. I'd never fought the old prince on the field, and records of his campaigns against the ratlings and the dead were near nonexistent – Lycaonese marked only victories, defeats and tallies of the dead. Anything else was considered pettily boastful. And while the Iron Prince's victories during the Great War were much better known, they'd been won waging a very different sort of war. I wasn't sure what *I* would have done in his place, much less what would have gone through the Prince of Hannover's mind at that crossroads.

"A war council was called," Tariq said. "And after some debate, it was agreed on that the wisest course would be to attack the enemy army in Juvelun to break through."

My brow rose and I forced myself to think. I could see the sense in it, squinting a bit, from his point of view. Assuming my

column broke through with swift victories at the Cigelin Sisters and Lauzon's Hollow, seizing Juvelun would allow us to link our armies in the central valley of Hainaut. The undead army from Malmedit would still be able to march south on our defences, but at that point our unified force could answer by leaving a strong garrison at Cigelin and then outmarch that army of the dead through the Ways. A neat trick, turning the destruction of the mining road against those who'd done it. Sure he'd take losses taking Juvelun from pushing out the dead, an uncomfortable amount of them, but it would salvage the strategic situation.

The problem was that Klaus Papenheim didn't know that the army in Luciennerie had disappeared: I'd tried to send messengers, but I very much doubted they'd made it through the gauntlet the Grey Pilgrim had described. Another army had vanished into thin air, and rubies to piglets that it was going to reappear near the capital around the time we finally took the Sisters. You know, right between a bloodied Papenheim and my own forces as the even larger Malmedit army marched on the Iron Prince's back. That was going to turn into a bloody, ruinous mess.

"You were there for the battle?" I asked.

"I left before," Tariq said. "Of all our Bestowed it was agreed I had the best chance of making it to you unharmed and in good time, so the duty fell to me. The battle for Juvelun will have taken place by now, but the outcome is known to neither myself nor the Ophanim."

I slowly nodded.

"You arrived in time," I admitted. "What you just told me will influence our pace quite a bit: I can no longer afford to take my time wiping out the remains of the enemy here and reducing the Sisters if the other column is in danger of a wipeout. We'll have to hurry forward."

Which was compounding risks with risk, I grimly thought. Already the Iron Prince had rolled the dice on taking Juvelun, and now I was going to have to rush taking Cigelin or his efforts might be in vain. The illusion of control we'd had when this campaign had begun, that bold armada of plans and schemes, was now dead and buried. We'd gained tactical victories but we were headed towards a strategic disaster. The only way to salvage this now was to push forward and through. *If we don't, all that's left is measuring the scale of the losses we'll incur.* I drained the rest of my cup, letting the warmth pour down my throat, and set the silver down.

Gods, silver. Who would have thought I'd end up drinking in that one day, when I'd first started sneaking sips of beer at the- I froze. Oh, oh. Fuck me, I'd had the clues all along hadn't I? I

knew the movements, I even knew how the enemy thought of us. I'd just not put them together, taken that last step.

"It's a rat trap," I murmured.

Limpid blue eyes narrowed at me, the exhausted old man turning back into the Peregrine in a heartbeat. The marks of bone-deep weariness were still there, but the flame had lit again.

"Explain," Tariq demanded.

"Back when I worked in a tavern," I said, "the owner would make these little rectangular boxes with the front almost open and bread at the end. It'd have a 'door' angled like this-"

I formed a roof with one palm, and angled another palm inwards to represent the door.

"- so that the rats would go after the bread and push the door up a bit. Only when they were inside the box-"

"They found the 'door' couldn't be pushed to let them out, as the wood only bent one way," the Grey Pilgrim quietly interrupted. "I've seen their like before, they are used in Levant as well."

"That bridge up north is our bread," I said. "It's not fake, I wouldn't think. If it does get built we're in a load of trouble, and we might actually lose this war the regular way. But that's not why the Dead King built it."

"He wanted us to enter the trap," Tariq said.

He wasn't getting it, though, I could hear it in his voice. A trap was a trap, to him, and it'd never been in doubt we'd fallen for one. I spelled it out more bluntly for him.

"You don't make a rat trap to protect the bread, Pilgrim," I said. "You make it to *kill the rat*."

The old man frowned.

"He means to destroy our armies," the Grey Pilgrim slowly said. "The battles, the bridge, even the capital – none of it means anything to him. Even if he loses all of Hainaut, so long as our armies are destroyed he doesn't care."

"It's all expendable," I agreed. "The army that disappeared from Luciennerie could be assaulting our defence lines around now, with an even larger army headed down the mining road to attack the eastern strongholds – with our own armies so far, and kept in the dark by lack of scrying, he might actually have had a shot at breaking through and into Brabant. But he didn't even try, because what he wants is to trap us in the central valley and

annihilate us. Not in one big battle where the odds are so utterly stacked against him-

Which we'd probably win, given the amount of heroes in our ranks.

"- but in smaller engagements that will bleed us dry, be they victories or defeats," Tariq muttered.

He didn't disagree with my assessment, finger circling the rim of his cup.

"But why the sudden obsession with the armies in Hainaut?" he finally asked. "What changed?"

I'd been wondering the same thing.

"The Gigantes came up on our side," I tried.

"Not in force," Tariq said. "They commit to help, not alliance."

"He might not know that," I said.

"Might is a thin foundation to build on," the Peregrine said. "Perhaps the Hierophant's work in the Arsenal?"

"It might spook him into coming after us this hard," I admitted. "Masego knows a lot more about him than can be comfortable for the likes of the Dead King. But the secrecy around Quartered Seasons was well-kept, Tariq. We were paranoid, and there's been breaches but I don't believe Malicia got through and so he should still be largely blind."

The Peregrine smiled sadly.

"You fight the Bard, Catherine," he said. "Neither walls nor locks nor oaths are enough to keep her from learning secrets if she wishes to know them."

I blinked.

"You think she sold us out to the Dead King?" I skeptically said. "If there's one person I'd buy she *wouldn't* sell us out to, it'd be him. What would she even-"

I froze the dreadful thought that came all too soon. The Grey Pilgrim sighed.

"So he comes after us with his entire hateful might," Tariq said. "So we suffer a stinging defeat at his hands and, like children in the dark, we pray for deliverance by our own guardian angel."

I rose to pour myself a second goddamn drink, and when the Pilgrim silently extended his own empty cup I filled it without qualms.

"I thought you trusted her," I finally said.

"I did," Tariq tiredly said. "And now I don't. If you live long enough, Catherine, you will find that time warps even the bonds you believed unshakable. And that we are never so wise as we think, even when we believe ourselves to be fools."

I held my tongue, even though it would have been pretty easy to stick a dagger or two in him now considering how badly we'd butted heads over the Intercessor over the years. It'd been a rough year for everyone, and there was no need for allies to make it worse.

"I got the shivers when you said that," I finally said, "and it makes me sick to even consider. So I'd tend to think you read this right. But he's not coming at us with his full might, Tariq. I've seen the battles up north he wages against the drow, and they're..."

I blew out a breath. In the back of my mind old words came to me as a harsh refrain. *Where are the devils, Catherine?* the Intercessor had once asked me. *Where are the hosts that darken the skies, and the demons he has kept leashed for centuries? Where are the rituals that poison the land and the sorceries never before seen?*

"Well, he's pulling out tricks there we haven't seen down here," I said. "And I know he has more: we haven't seen either devils or demons yet, for one, and he's perfectly capable of calling on both."

The old man shook his head.

"He cannot use either," Tariq said. "It would represent too steep an increase in strength on his side of the scales, Catherine. Providence would allow us to bridge the gap, and the last thing the Dead King wants is a war of equals with such power in play: it would put his forces at a genuine risk of annihilation."

The Grey Pilgrim leaned back into his seat.

"He has been most careful to limit his efforts to grinding us into dust by attrition for good reason," Tariq continued. "It is a method of victory that involves very little risk for him and has proved difficult to handle."

I frowned. That... held up somewhat, I supposed. I honestly wasn't sure what providence would be able to spit out to even the odds, but arguably that was rather the point. I'd known for a long time there was a risk to villains winning by too large or obvious a margin – invincibility as a prelude to failure, my father had once phrase it – but I'd not considered that on the scale the Pilgrim had. It was the crusading mindset, I supposed. It was not

only battles and Named that had a story, but the crusade itself. It was what I knew of the Dead King's rise to power that had me inclined to believe the Peregrine: carefulness had always been his priority back then, even if it meant slowing his advance.

He'd always preferred giving his enemies no opening to swift victories.

"This changes things," I finally said.

He wetted his lips, sipping at the brandy.

"Does it?" the Peregrine asked. "Retreating serves no purpose. We are committed to war, even knowing his intentions are different than we'd expected."

I went rifling through my pockets for my pipe, the long shaft of dragonbone that Masego had gifted me years ago comforting to the touch. A packet of wakeleaf, still from the White Knight's gift, was carefully stuffed and I lit the leaf by tapping a finger against the rim and letting black flames slither in. I breathed in deep, the acrid smoke filling my lungs before I breathed out a long stream of it upwards.

"If it's our armies that are in his sights, it means he's gotten sloppy elsewhere," I said. "His resources aren't unlimited, and while it might seem like this trap has been years in the making I'd wager it's a lot more hastily assembled than that."

"The Intercessor would not have wanted him to win cleanly, that is true," the Pilgrim mused. "The more costly the victory to him the better, in her eyes, and that means a warning as late as she could feasibly give it."

I grunted in agreement, pulling at my pipe and blowing out a ring of smoke.

"We thought he'd guard that bridge up north like it was his own baby," I said, "but I'd wager it's been stripped clean. Sure we still can't account for the Luciennerie army, but it can't *teleport* – there's no way it could have gone all the way up there so quickly."

"You're suggesting a raid," Tariq said, sounding genuinely surprised.

"I am," I replied. "First we'll need to reunite with Prince Klaus' army, but when do I believe we need to send at least one band of five up north to demolish that bridge. We won't get that opportunity twice."

"You suggest sending away five Bestowed, and they would have to be among our most powerful to have a real chance of succeeding,

before a series of battle that promise to be the decisive clash of this war," the Pilgrim slowly said. "That is... bold."

Which meant he'd wanted to say foolish, I amusedly thought, but my favourable record against him had earned a more diplomatic phrasing.

"We can argue the point later," I dismissed, "but I'd be a mistake to find out at this late hour we lack the stomach to take opportunities when they are afforded us. Regardless, we now need to move forward as quickly as we can and link with Prince Klaus' column. If you rest through the rest of the day, will you be fighting fit tomorrow?"

"A few hours will have me back on my feet," Tariq hesitatingly said. "I have never needed much sleep, and less so after I was blessed with the friendship of the Ophanim."

He kept hesitating, so I cocked an eyebrow at him. It finally moved him to speak.

"You seem... invigorated," the Grey Pilgrim said, and raised a hand as if to ward off a protest. "I mean no ill by it, only that a conversation that would have set others to despair seems instead to have lit a fire in you."

Had it? I pulled at my pipe, considering it, then ultimately shrugged.

"This is the most confident I've felt about this campaign since it started," I admitted.

The old man started in surprise.

"I take it you're not making sport of me," Tariq said.

I nodded and, to my own surprise, he snorted.

"Ashen Gods, *why?*" he asked. "I do not believe this will end in tears, though many will be shed along the way, but little of the news I brought you strike me as sources of confidence. The Enemy has fooled us and led us into great peril."

"It was always going to get ugly," I frankly said. "But now we knew the forces in motion, Pilgrim. We know – or have a good guess, at the very least – why the Dead King is acting now, what it is he is after and where all those things sit in the greater tapestry of the war. For the first time since our armies went marching north, we are no longer blind. We can finally find a way to win, and I mean *properly* win. Not just survive by the skin of our teeth or settle for a bloody draw."

My fingers were already itching for ink and paper as well as a quiet place to think. Oh, we were in the pit for sure. I was

pretty sure the Iron Prince was about to get stuck between two large armies while I caught up, and if either of us made a mistake then this could turn into the single worst military defeat the Grand Alliance had suffered since the beginning of the war. Hells, it could turn into the kind of defeat it was simply impossible to recover from by sheer dint of lives and resources lost. But this pit, it was an old friend. I'd been here before, through my own mistakes and the machinations of others, and the feeling of the bottom of the barrel under my feet did not scare me.

I grinned at the Grey Pilgrim, baring my teeth ferally.

"It's the eleventh hour, Peregrine," I said. "Midnight Bell is on the verge, and when it rings we'll all have to pay our dues, but the song isn't over. Not yet."

"You have a plan, then?" Tariq Fleetfoot asked.

Blue eyes in a tanned face met my gaze, and in there I found a light that was not Light – no, that one was entirely his own. It was cold and patient and ruthless in a way that even some of my kind would blanch at, qualities that a lifetime of service to the Choir of Mercy had sharpened into a razor's edge. There wasn't a lot a man like the Grey Pilgrim wouldn't do, for the sake of the world. Looking into those eyes, I wondered if there was really anything at all.

"I have the bare bones of one," I said. "It begins by taking back the initiative."

"There are still enemies ahead of you," Tariq said. "The remnant of the army that held Lauzon's Hollow, as I understand it, now heading towards the Cigelin Sisters."

"And that force needs to be destroyed," I agreed, "but I don't need our entire army to do that. Not when our reserve under General Pallas will be joining the fray as well."

"You would split your host in two," the Pilgrim said. "And then take half to relieve the Iron Prince?"

"We're going to do better than that, Tariq," I said, rising to my feet.

I went looking through my desk, opening drawers until I found what I wanted: a small scroll, inked by Scribe's own hand. It was a neat, lovely map of the Principality of Hainaut whose accuracy meant it was probably worth as much a herd of horses. I unfolded it across the table, gesturing for the Pilgrim to come closer as I set down a bottle on one corner to keep it down and an empty inkwell on the other.

"If Prince Klaus won the battle for Juvelun," I said, tapping the town with a finger, "then right now he's marching into the central valley of Hainaut, what the locals call the highlands."

"And you believe an enemy army, the one that was once in Luciennerie, will have travelled unseen to strike him by surprise there," the Pilgrim said.

"I do," I said. "But I also think that the Dead King believes us more conservative in our attack than we actually have been: there's nothing about the way his troops are moving that even hints at his being aware that the Cigelin Sisters are about to be attacked by General Pallas. So from his point of view, even if a hero like you manages to bring word about what happened to the Prince Klaus' column I'll still be stuck here clearing out the dead heading towards the Sisters."

It actually shed some light on why the army defending Lauzon's Hollow had been so willing to retreat, even considering the bloody nose I'd given it. At this point holding the Hollow was no longer a strategic priority for him, it was a lot more important to tie down my army for a few more days while he finished mopping up Klaus Papenheim's column. And the worse was that the Dead King wasn't even wrong about my needing to clear out the dead ahead of us. It wasn't a force that I could afford leaving at my back while taking the Ways to reinforce the Iron Prince. If I did, I would then be stuck with a massive army behind enemy lines and with no supply lines. Hells, at that point he would barely even need to fight: he could just keep harassing us and let starvation do the work for him.

Fortunately, General Pallas was still in the wind and about to make her bite felt.

"I'll be leaving behind the Third Army and half the Firstborn along with some of the Proceran fantassins, but most of my army will be headed..."

I trailed off, leaning forward and squinting at the map before finally laying a finger at the height of halfway up the stretch of Julienne's Highway connecting the Sisters to the capital, but a little to the east.

"There," I finished.

The old man's gaze followed my finger, taking in the map as he considered it all in silence.

"And what is it that you intend to do in the middle of nowhere?" the Grey Pilgrim finally asked.

I breathed in deep of the wakeleaf, enjoying the burn and taking my time before spewing out a stream of grey smoke. I smiled coldly at the Peregrine.

"Why, Tariq, but we're going to ambush the force about to ambush the Iron Prince."

Chapter 62: Adjournment

"Empires die to wars, emperors to knives."

– Free Cities saying

General Abigail of Summerholm, I'd noticed, always entered a tent like she expected it was going to be filled with a pack of hungry wolves. *Or maybe just mine*, I mused. She'd never quite managed to hide that she was rather terrified of me, which made toying with her something of a guilty pleasure – kind of like ringing bell near a particularly twitchy rabbit. With the seemingly permanently sunburnt cheek and watery blue eyes, the first Callowan general since the Conquest didn't look like much. That delicate little nose made her look almost dainty, and the messy hair was seemingly match with dark rings around her eyes that over the years I'd seen thin but never entirely go away.

She was also one of the sharper field commanders in the Army of Callow, though I doubted she'd agree if asked. I'd not bet on her against Hune, not for a few years yet, but General Bagram of the Fourth had some bad habits from his Legion days – too prone to being defensive, too fond of using his heavies as a hammer to smash everything – to match the experience those years had given him, so that fight would be a much closer one. Mind you, it had to be said that this was true in part because the Army was horribly thin on senior officers. Hells, it'd been thin on those even after it'd cannibalized two full legions in the wake of the Folly and we'd taken considerable losses since then.

If Juniper and I had been able to spare a few years between wars to build off a proper officer corps she'd merely be one of the finer youngbloods, marked for advancement but still needing seasoning. As things stood, though, the decision to appoint her as the head of the force that'd hit the Cigelin Sisters wasn't me playing favourites with a fellow Callowan: I was genuinely putting the person in charge I believed was the finest pick. Hune herself might have been even better, but I'd need the Second with me. Though the sapper corps was now nominally separate from the rest of the Army of Callow, in practice the largest part of it had been lodged with the Second Army for years.

General Abigail saluted, biting the inside of her cheek, and approached my personal desk. At my side I felt Hakram shift in his wheelchair, trying to hide his amusement at the sight. The

phalanges regularly seeded flattering rumours about Abigail to facilitate my long-term intentions for her – I'd need someone with an unimpeachable reputation and absolutely no ambition to hold the Army of Callow for Vivienne, when she became queen – and I knew for a fact that he'd indulged some of his gossip tendencies by crafting a few himself. I was pretty sure that delightful yarn about the good general having impaled a Revenant with the standard of the Third was his work, for one.

"Your Majesty," Abigail of Summerholm said. "I came as summoned."

I leaned back into my seat, regarding her gravely, and drummed my fingers against the desk. The general visibly wilted.

"That is *cruel*," Hakram said in Kharsum, tone appreciative.

"You're right, Adjutant," I somberly said, "it's best to get this over with."

The rabbit whimpered and I was a bad, bad woman. I wasn't going to stop, this was *much* too entertaining, but dues where they were due.

"Ma'am?" Abigail squeaked out.

"You know why you're here, general," I severely said.

The other woman twitched, like nervousness made into a body spasm, and out the stream came.

"I'm sorry," General Abigail stammered, "I know it's Proceran wine, and that makes me unpatriotic, but it's just so *good*-"

I sat back in my chair, smothering a grin.

"- I didn't even know they were loaded die, I got them from this goblin sergeant in the Second and-"

Oh Crows, she was still talking.

"- I wasn't sure if they were really flirting, I mean they're Blood and they're engaged-"

Had I broken one of my most valuable officers? Had I finally taken this too far?

"- in my defence Brotel is a very confusing name for a town, especially with Alamans pronunciation, and I didn't know he was an *actual* lord-"

Nah, I decided. This was just my reward for suffering through the last few weeks of soul-grinding warfare. It was like having a good smoke, only better because it came at someone else's expense. It occurred to me, after that thought, that perhaps the

company I had kept over the last few years had not done wonders for my moral character. It was probably Black's fault if you went back far enough, I reassured myself. Not at all something I'd picked up all on my own.

"- I didn't really mean that we should eat all Proceran children, I mean how would we actually do that – okay, so maybe if we did like another sort of magistrate dedicated solely to baby-eating, but that would be really expensive and I don't think the House of Light would-"

Hakram cleared his throat, which silenced her in a heartbeat.

"You know what must be done now, I think," I solemnly said.

"You'll send me back home, where I will officially be a general but in reality stripped of all authority," General Abigail hopefully said.

"Even better," I said. "Adjutant?"

He wheeled up to her, passing her a folded parchment which she opened warily. Her eyes widened when she caught sight of the royal seal at the bottom.

"Congratulations, Lady Abigail," I said. "You'll have to pick a last name, now that you're a noble in the formal peerage of the Kingdom of Callow."

"What," Abigail weakly said.

"Quite right," I agreed. "It's not a landed title, mind you, but I've made my stance clear on handing those out."

I'd largely inherited a nobility with its back broken from my father, but Gods knew I would have gotten rid of even my last few northern barons if I could. I had no issue with court titles and even knighthoods, but the notion of legitimate rulers whose only talent was having the luck of being born to the right womb still rubbed me wrong. The governorships weren't a perfect system, but they were a damned sight better than the labyrinth of noble laws and privileges that'd preceded them.

"I don't understand," Abigail tried again.

"In recognition of your bold and heroic charge at the Second Battle of Lauzon's Hollow," Adjutant said, visibly enjoying every moment of this, "you have been made a noble of the Kingdom of Callow. The crown rewards exceptional service, General Abigail, and yours has not disappointed."

It also cut off any avenue of retreat if she tried to retire. Being a noble war heroine would make her one of the most eligible

women in Callow after the war – she'd be dragged into the kingdom's affairs whether she wanted it or not.

"I," General Abigail hesitantly said, "thank you?"

"It was my pleasure," I grinned.

I meant every word, if not necessarily in the sense she might expect. It looked like she was trying to convince herself she was out of the woods, so immediately I hit her with the second announcement.

"It was also my pleasure to name you as the leading commander of the force that will continue with the assault on the Cigelin Sisters," I casually added.

Abigail froze.

"I don't mean to question your judgement, Your Majesty," the general delicately said.

"I don't think anyone's ever told me that without adding 'but' afterwards," I noted, and cocked an eyebrow.

She swallowed.

"*However*," General Abigail gallantly tried, "would General Hune not be a better fit for this appointment?"

"I've got other uses for her," I dismissed.

"It is only natural the command should fall to you, general," Hakram gravelled. "You are, after all, a member of the formal Callowan peerage."

I hid a grin behind my hand, admiring the sheer bastardry involved in that sentence. He hadn't lost his touch, evidently. General Abigail glared at the parchment that'd turned her into a noble as if the sheer depths of her hatred would be enough to set it aflame, though sadly for her Creation did not deign to indulge her.

"Surely Princess Beatrice–"

"Coming with me," I idly said, "you're getting the fantassins, though."

She paused a moment, considering the odds of my agreeing to pass overall command to mercenaries before rightfully dismissing the notion.

"Grandmaster Talbot?" she attempted, with remarkable tenacity.

I looked at her steadily and she deflated. The Summerholm girl gathered her courage though, and back into the breach she went.

"Perhaps the Dominion should-" she began.

I watched the wheels turn as she weighed whether Razin or Aquiline being in charge was more or less likely to get her killed.

"- leave a few companies of scouts behind, to compensate for the departure of the goblins," she hastily adjusted midsentence.

"Poor lordlings," Hakram amusedly said in Kharsum. "That'd sting, if they ever got wind of it."

"Quite right, Adjutant," I happily said. "She should get Firstborn instead. Ten thousand under Mighty Sudone and Lord Soln will do the trick, I would think."

She stared at me woefully.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," General Abigail said, in the tone of someone who'd just been asked to kiss the axe about to take their neck on the chopping block.

"I understand I'll be putting something a burden on you, as you'll still be commanding the Third while leading this part of the campaign," I said. "For that reason, I've assigned you an assistant you should find helpful in many regards."

With impeccable timing the guard outside my tent parted the flap to introduce the newest arrival, the young orc announcing the entrance of 'Secretary Elene'. Scribe had objected to our using her true name, if 'Eudokia' truly was that. It'd been the name she used as a Calamity, at least, which counted for something. I found it fascinating that though Scribe's aspect – **Fade**, she'd eventually told me, though it could be a lie – was pulsing as it always did and Abigail was in no way proof for it, the general's perpetual wariness meant she kept noticing that she wasn't noticing much about Scribe every few heartbeats.

A fascinating demonstration of the virtues of paranoia when you... oh Gods I was starting to sound like my father wasn't I? I cleared my throat, addressing both women.

"General Abigail, allow me to introduce you to Secretary Elene," I said. "She is a member of the adjunct secretariat."

Which was true, she even had a salary. I'd already ordered her pay docked twice for 'indecorous skulking', which was an official breach of regulations in the Legions of Terror because it was an institution that'd had goblins in its ranks for over two decades.

"I mean no offence, Your Majesty," General Abigail said, "but is she perhaps a magical assassin meant to kill me if I displease you?"

I choked on a startled burst of laughter. My lack of immediate denial had those sunburnt cheeks turning pale.

"For shame, general," Adjutant chided. "We don't enroll our magical assassins in the phalanges, it's the first place people would look. We're not *amateurs*."

"That makes sense," the dark-haired woman muttered, actually brightening some. "So this whole magical whammy I'm feeling is, uh, accidental?"

"Secretary Elene is Named," I said. "But I'm speaking for her too much already. Why don't you introduce yourself, secretary?"

"I am Secretary Elene of the adjunct secretariat," Scribe told Abigail in a tone so dry it rivalled the Hungering Sands. "Pleased to meet you."

"And you," the general replied, seemingly by reflex.

There was a pregnant pause.

"She's shy," I confided. "You might know her better as the Scribe."

General Abigail blinked in surprise.

"The old one's finally dead?" she asked.

"There's no need to be insulting," Scribe mildly said, "I assure you I am still quite spry."

"You're a *Calamity*?" Abigail wailed.

"Retired," Scribe noted. "I am now gainfully employed by the Kingdom of Callow. Which has my adequately remunerated loyalty."

"You *conquered* the Kingdom of Callow," the general said, voice gone shrill with dismay.

"It's a fair point," I admitted.

"She has you there," Adjutant agreed.

Scribe shot us a look that was deeply put-upon, though I'd met the godsdamned Calamities so if she was going to try to sell me she was used to less fucking around she was going to have to do better than that.

"I promise not to do it again," Scribe tried.

"See," I beamed, "already we're all getting along. I'm sure the two of you will both bloom from the cooperation."

Abigail twitched.

"Of course," she said. "I'm sure you're right, Your Majesty."

"I'm glad of your support for the notion," I said, "I wouldn't have forced it on you otherwise."

I'd never seen someone die a little inside before, it was quite riveting. I dismissed them both afterwards, and by the time they were walking out already Scribe was asking questions about the supply situation that the general was clearly lying her way through answering. A promising pair, I decided. Abigail of Summerholm was too used to scraping by when the danger wasn't immediate, which having Scribe keeping her on track should fix, while Scribe was too used to being the enabler of someone's grand design: it would be a genuine challenge for her to assist someone as inclined to improvisation as General Abigail.

Named liked a challenge, deep down, and I suspected that having one would do more to keep Scribe bound to us than everything else I'd done so far.

With them leaving Hakram and I were left alone, though only momentarily – within moments one of his helping hands drifted in, bringing a report. He looked through it and dismissed the man, wheeling up to the desk where I was pouring myself a finger of brandy. I raised an eyebrow questioningly and he nodded, so I rustled up a cup to pour another.

"Roland's band has killed the last creatures previously bound to Beastmaster," he said. "Casualties among the companies that accompanied them were light, mostly caused when the manticore went berserk."

The least dangerous of the creatures the man had mastered had either fled or grieved, but those who preyed on humans had instead gone violently rabid. Fortunately standing orders had been for Beastmaster to keep his menagerie far from where the Dead King could weaponize it, so it'd not turned into a costly rampage. Not that the hunts had been bloodless, for all that the Vagrant Spear had been wildly enthusiastic and the Blood had treated it like the social event of the decade.

"Burn the corpses and go through the standard measures to ensure none of it ends up in the Dead King's ranks," I said. "Anything else?"

"Archer's drinking," Hakram said. "Heavily. The Concocter joined her not long ago."

I grimaced, considering what *heavily* would mean when it was Indrani doing the drinking. I'd have to dip a toe there later and see if my presence was welcome. I'd not been light-handed while handing down discipline, so it might be that even though grieving she genuinely would not want to see me. Still, that she'd broken out the strong stuff before night even fell was not a good sign.

"I'll see what I can do," I said. "But it seems delicate situation to step into."

He hummed in agreement, offering up his cup. We knocked them and drank, the gesture smooth and practiced from years of repetition.

"She rarely talks about Refuge," Hakram said afterwards, "it's not shame, I think, but perhaps the absence of pride."

"She talks about Ranger all the time," I grunted.

"She *mentions* the Lady of the Lake," Adjutant corrected. "When does she ever speak of the woman beyond a few words? Even Vivienne shares more easily."

It had admittedly occurred to me in the past that Vivienne had been the Thief – a sneak and keep of secrets – and my enemy for years, and yet I'd still known her name before Indrani's. For someone so outwardly rambunctious Archer actually kept her card pretty close to the chest.

"It's how she is," I eventually said. "We're not all built for deep talks and scrutiny, Hakram. Some people prefer their dark corners without lights shined on them."

"I'm not sure that is truly the case," he gravelled. "Maybe a few years back, but now?"

He hesitated.

"Since the Everdark," Hakram specified. "And I don't mean because you two started sharing a bed down there."

"Great Strycht," I murmured.

Where I had died and risen again, First Under the Night. Where Archer had fought in my name against Mighty by the battalion, only to end up drowned in ice when my arrogance saw me eviscerated by the Sisters and Winter's power spill out like a sea. That near-death, one that she'd admitted she would not have been able to avoid even if she'd known it was coming, had shaken her greatly. She'd grown past it, past the fear, but it had changed her nonetheless. Sometimes just seeing what lay past the door was enough, even if you managed to close it after.

"She'd never have admitted a thing to Masego, before that," Hakram said. "She would have figured there was time enough later,

and eventually that it was too late. No more, though. And I think it will be the same with Refuge, if the right person asks."

"That might not be me," I bluntly said.

The orc shook his head.

"It's different, what she has with Masego," Adjutant said. "He wouldn't judge, it's why she wouldn't mind speaking. But you're the one she confesses to, Catherine. Not me, not Vivienne, not the ties she's made since she became a captain of Named."

I leaned back, passing a hand through my hair.

"We'll see," I finally said. "I had to bring down the hammer on her yesterday, Hakram. It won't have gone over well."

The trouble was that, the way I figured, Indrani had joined the Truce and Terms largely because she was already part of the Woe and it was what we were doing. But the way I'd run the Woe wasn't the way I had to behave as an officer of the Grand Alliance, and even if it was tempting I couldn't just mark 'the Woe' as a different category within the Named I had authority over. It would undermine all I was trying to do if I treated them differently when it came to my duties. I wasn't sure, though, how much Indran actually cared about the Terms – or even the Accords, in the long view. She'd not take the lash for a cause she was indifferent to, that much I knew.

It just wasn't in her nature.

"You do her disservice, I think," Hakram thoughtfully said, "but I understand why you would. Sometimes it's more comforting to pick at a wound than have it healed."

My lips thinned in irritation. It was not a charitable interpretation of this, and it would have earned more than a scowl for anyone else.

"I'm not sure what wound you're supposed to be talking about," I said.

"That she's going to leave, eventually," Adjutant calmly said. "That she made that choice long before she made the one to love you."

I almost cursed – and not amusedly, not in poor humour. I almost cursed because that was the reflex, when something suddenly pricked you. I'd forgotten how sharp Hakram's truths had a way of being.

"Figured it all out, did you?" I said, tone a tad bitter.

It was not a pleasant part of me he'd dragged up to the light of day. There'd been a reason I'd pushed it in a corner where the day didn't reach.

"It was not insight, Catherine, but recognition," he said.

His licked his chops then stayed silent for a moment.

"I have done the same," Adjutant abruptly said. "With... this."

He gestured all around us, encompassing everything as I went still. We'd not even come to close to addressing the subject since I'd refused the proposal to support the Clans in rebellion against the Tower as it currently said.

"I'm not sure what you mean," I carefully said.

"I needed to know," Hakram quietly said, "if it was trust in principle or in truth. If you'd make a mistake simply because I asked you to, out of pity. More than anything else, that would have been intolerable."

My eyes narrowed.

"Your proposal," I said, "you botched it on purpose. It was never meant to be accepted."

"I hacked away what might make it feasible," he admitted. "And had them present you with what was left."

My fingers clenched, but I forced myself to breathe out.

"I don't think you understand how difficult the position you put me in was," I said, tone forcefully calm.

"I do," Hakram replied. "But I will not apologize for it, no more than you will apologize for barring from the battlefield and saddling me with a Named bodyguard."

"That's different," I hissed.

He bared his fangs the slightest bit, but his neck remained straight – not bent to the side, which would imply apology or submission. He was unmoved.

"You did it so you'd sleep soundly at night," Adjutant said. "So did I. And I will forgive you your shade of selfishness, if you forgive me mine."

It wasn't the same. I knew it stung, that I was keeping him away from the blades and saddling with what someone might consider a minder, but I was doing it so he wouldn't get killed. What he'd done... *But he doesn't want to stay in the chair*, Catherine, I reminded myself. *He wants to risk the steel.* And it was a

decision I considered stupid and unreasonable, more a spasm of empty pride than anything with sense to it, but it wasn't mine to make. Not really. He'd bent his neck because it would help me sleep at night, and now he was asking me to do the same. It tasted like ash, but I would not deny he was not asking more of me than I had asked of him.

Perhaps less, even. That tended to be the way with us.

"It stings," I finally said. "That you didn't trust me."

He slowly nodded. I sighed and looked away.

"But maybe you're not wrong, about picking at wounds," I admitted. "Half the anger is fear that I could have failed the test."

"You didn't."

It was simply said, without frills or false promises. It did not reassure me as much as I would have thought it would, for all that.

"It's not going to be the same, is it?" I quietly asked. "Even when time passes. When it's not so fresh."

"Things change, Catherine," the orc replied. "We are not the same people we were when this all began."

Grief seized me by throat, as much for what had been done as who we'd once been. It had my eyes burning, for the first time in years.

"It's not a failure, Cat," Hakram gently said, taking my hand. "It's what we were after from the start. We can't change the world without changing with it."

"Yet it feels like a failure," I murmured, "doesn't it?"

Like I'd broken something. Those days in the Arsenal had cost us all more than I'd first understood. As all things touched by the Intercessor, they were poison in every way.

"We pay our prices," Adjutant simply said. "That's what victory is, even at its finest."

I blinked and rubbed at my eyes, parting my hand from his. My throat felt raw, like I'd swallowed glass and some had stayed lodged.

"So it is," I breathed out.

He patted my leg, then took his wheels in hand and began to make his way out of the tent. He paused, though, after a few armfuls.

"One last thing," Adjutant said, turning just enough to meet my eyes.

I waited in silence.

"If you ever speak to me of debt, Catherine," Hakram of the Howling Wolves evenly said, "I will leave and never come back."

It felt like a gut punch and I took it about as well, fingers clenching as he wheeled himself out of the tent without turning back. Gods. He'd said that and meant every word, hadn't he? The fear that flowed through my veins at that realization was almost paralyzing, and it was with trembling hands I reached for my pipe and lit up a packet of wakeleaf. *Fuck*. I'd known that nothing was absolute, that everything had a breaking point, but for him to just say it outright... I stayed alone on my tent, eyes closed and seeking calm that would not come.

After most of an hour passed I gave it up for the lost cause it was, and forced myself to seek out Indrani. Just because I felt like someone had yanked out the ground from under me didn't mean I could afford to stop moving.

—

I'd not been sure what to expect, exactly, when I entering the tent where I'd been told Indrani and the Concocter were drinking together. The two empty bottles of Creusens red abandoned on the ground were hardly a surprise, but I'd figured they would at least be seated. Instead the two women were leaning back against a flipped table, toppled chairs around them, and between the two of them a large glass bottle containing what looked like boiling water – though inexplicably the inside of the tent *reeked* of cherries – and half a dozen shoddily-made clay cups that were chipped from use.

Indrani, out of her armour and in a rough linen tunic with little usual scarf hanging loose around her neck, was very sloppily pouring herself some of the transparent boiling liquor and spilling more than she realized. The Concocter, on the other side of the flipped table, took a moment for me to recognize: every hair on her body was now coal black, and her eyes the darkest I had ever seen. She was seemingly a lot more invested in mocking Archer's pouring skills than noticing there was a third person in the tent, so it was Indrani who noticed me.

"Cat," she breathed out. "You're here."

She started, then scowled.

"Cocky's a villain," Indrani said. "I didn't break your rule."

"I'm not here for that," I assured her, then glanced at the other woman. "Concocter, always a pleasure."

"The very same," she replied, in the slow and careful tone of someone trying to seem less drunk than they actually were. "Would you like to sit, Your Majesty?"

"She hates nobles," Indrani confessed to her. "It's hilarious, she can never resist stepping on them even if she's the big noble now."

"Nobles are always big," Concocter solemnly replied. "Fat. Fucking Consortium pricks, they always gouge me on prices. S'why I sell them mostly poisons."

"We've been drinking, I see," I said, reluctantly amused. "Thank you, Concocter, I will."

I grabbed a chair, though instead of setting it aright I kept it on the side and pulled back my cloak as I sat down on the ground and leaned back against the legs. My leg twinged with pain, but it passed.

"See," Indrani slurred. "I told you she's not prissy."

"I never said she was," Concocter said, sounding irritated. "You always put words in my mouth."

I felt a pang of envy. Much as they seemed to genuinely rub each other wrong, there was an underlying closeness that I'd never really had the likes of. I'd made my own family, when I got older, but those two looked nothing all and yet in that moment of familiar irritation they'd seemed like sisters.

"So what are we drinking?" I asked. "Smells strong."

"Orchard Elixir," Concocter proudly said. "My own creation."

"Kickin' Cherries," Archer snickered. "You gotta call it that, I keep telling you."

"I would rather kiss John," Concocter replied.

A heartbeat passed, and then laughing drunkenly they loudly shouted '*and he's dead*' together.

"Gods rest his soul," Concocter added. "So pretty. So dumb."

"Ah, Tinkles," Indrani breathed out, still laughing a bit. "At least he went out like a champion. It was a good scrap, Marchford."

"If you're going to keep laughing that loud, I'll require a glass of that elixir," I said.

I ignored Indrani's accusations of treachery and leaned forward after Concocter poured me a glass more deftly than I would have expected. When she took the clay cup in hand and began to pass it to me, though, she froze. So did Archer. They were both looking at the cup, the laughter gone.

"Fuck," Archer sighed.

"I'm missing something," I noted.

"Lysander made those," Concocter said. "We must have been what, twelve?"

"He was a little older, but yeah," Indrani sighed. "He needed help for his first shot at a pack of stryxes, so he made these little gifts for everyone."

"It's tradition when you're asking a favour, in some parts of the Free Cities," Concocter told me. "Shows goodwill. He was from there – outskirts of Atalante, he figured, but he was never sure. His family were hunters, moved around a lot."

"I got a leather bracelet with stones sowed on," Indrani said, half-smiling. "It was shittily made, like the cups, but..."

"He'd put in effort," Concocter echoed. "It was hard to say no after that. We weren't as hard with each other, back then."

"I don't have to drink from it if you don't want me to," I gently said.

"No," Concocter softly said after a moment, pressing it into my hand. "It should be used. It's what it's for."

I took it up and nodded thanks, taking an experimental sip from the transparent liquor – which was, even now, popping small bubbles like faintly boiling water – and immediately choked. The taste, Gods, the taste. It was exactly as strong as it smelled, and kicked just as strongly as aragh.

"Sisters," I cursed. "That is *abominable*."

They both cackled with laughter.

"I usually cut it with fruit juice," Concocter smirked. "I could always fetch something lighter if you'd prefer, Your Majesty."

"Call me Catherine," I snorted, waving dismissively. "And I've drunk worse for worse reasons, Concocter. I pretty much switched exclusively to aragh after I ate Winter, and I think it might burn even worse."

"She pretends she's all tough, but you should see her guzzle that Vale summer wine," Indrani said.

The traitorous wench. I drank from the cup again, and it wasn't as bad. Presumably the first sip had killed everything inside my mouth capable of feeling taste, so this was just flogging a dead horse.

"I should have let the Prince of Nightfall have you when we first got to Skade," I said. "It would have saved me heaps of trouble."

"I'll toast to that," Concocter drily said, raising her cup.

Even Indrani drink, because evidently it was that kind of a night. Well, afternoon anyway.

"This is our wake for Lysander," Indrani told me afterwards. "Such as it is."

"Never drank much, Beastmaster," Concocter said. "Didn't like the loss of control. He was that kind of a prick."

"I'll toast to that," Archer said, and again we drank.

I didn't actually talk that much over the following hours. I didn't need to: they were, I grasped almost eager to tell their stories to someone who'd not heard them before. I suspected that the Concocter was a lot lonelier than she seemed, for all that she proud as a cat. On occasion I used the power of being less drunk than the others to steer away from squabbles, but the two of them proved surprisingly amiable with each other. Eventually the Concocter fell into a drowse, slumping against the table, and Indrani rested her head against it as well. She closed her eyes, and I almost figured she'd fallen asleep as well until she spoke.

"I'm glad you came," Indrani quietly said.

"So am I," I replied, just as quietly. "Almost didn't."

"Why?"

"Figured you might not want me there, after yesterday," I admitted.

She snorted.

"Silly," Archer said. "Not angry about that. You were fighting for your way."

"Not yours," I said. "And I had to rap your knuckles."

"It's just what happens, in those situations," Indrani said.

The well of gratefulness I felt at her words did not quite silence the curiosity.

"Thought you'd be angry," I said. "You don't really care for the Truce and Terms."

"I don't," Archer easily said. "Don't mind them either, they're not likely to get in my way. But they're your way, Cat. Your mark, what you want to get done. I stepped on that, even if I didn't mean to. I'd do the same if it was the other way around, if clapped chains around my feet."

I slowly nodded. Hakram did have, I thought, that nasty habit of being right.

"You going to be all right?" I softly asked.

Silence followed for a long moment.

"Yeah," Archer finally said. "I just... I thought there was still time, Cat. To make something new."

She smiled bitterly.

"Stupid," Indrani said. "Should have learned better, after Great Strycht."

"I get it," I said. "Nauk wasn't what he used to be to me, not at the end, but when I heard he'd died at Sarcella..."

We shared a comfortable silence after that.

"He wouldn't have been as easy to live with as the image in my head," Indrani smiled. "I know that. Probably wouldn't even have worked. So I guess it's just having the possibility that I'm really grieving."

"It's still something, 'Drani," I replied.

"I guess it is," she murmured. "I guess it is."

After a moment her breath evened out, and I realized she'd fallen asleep. Reluctant to wake her so soon, I stayed seated even if my leg was beginning to ache and polished off the last of that atrocious Orchard Elixir. I was keeping an ear out for breathing, which was how I realized that the Concocter was no longer asleep almost immediately.

"It's a nice thing you did," Concocter whispered. "Coming here. Taking care of her."

"She's one of mine," I simply said.

"She used to be one of ours," the dark-haired villainess said, "but nice was never our game of choice. It's done well by her."

She sighed.

"You've done well by her," Concocter said. "The Woe."

"She's done well by us," I said. "Miss her?"

The other woman snorted.

"No," Concocter said. "She was fucking horrible, you know? To all of us. And we were horrible right back, but she had this need to *win* and..."

She shook her head.

"But it was us, at the start," she murmured. "The five of us. Other students came and went, but it was us and the Lady. It counts for something, even if we don't want it to. Lysander was a vicious shit of a man, Catherine. Selfish and brutal. But I miss it too, just like her. The... possibility."

"You weren't asleep," I said.

"Only half," she shrugged. "Drifted in and out. But I don't miss her, no. Maybe I'll see her again in the years to come, and maybe I won't. I'm not sure if I forgive her, or if there's anything to forgive. But I like..."

She softly laughed.

"I like that I have the possibility, now," Concocter said. "So thank you for that, Catherine Foundling. Because she wouldn't have gotten there alone."

"She would have," I replied, meaning every word.

"And believe that, I figure, is what made her want it in the first place," Concocter murmured.

I wasn't going to argue the point, not with a grieving woman whose history with Archer was even more complicated than my own, so I stayed silent.

"The Huntress," I said, "will she be all right?"

"Alexis never learned to cope with anything but her fists," Concocter said. "It does her no favours, when tragedy strikes. But she'll get better, if you keep them separate. They've always brought out the worst in each other."

"Thought you might go see her instead if Indrani, at first," I said.

"She's with her friends right now," the dark-haired Named shrugged, "people she actually likes. I'll look in on her tomorrow. I don't expect much to come out of it."

"I thought you two were closer," I frowned.

"You measure us all by your band," Concocter murmured. "You shouldn't. It's rare, what you have. I've seen the other side lives, Catherine, and they don't get it handed to them either. It's rare, and it's precious. Don't let it go easy."

"I won't," I quietly said.

She nodded, and made herself comfortable against the table. I waited until her breath was even again, then slowly pushed myself up to my feet. Night had fallen, and with it the time I could spend here. I would soon be needed. Still a little drunk, I limped out into the dark. The time agreed upon was soon, very soon. I wasn't surprised when a grey-clad wanderer crept out of the shade, falling in at my side as I headed to the edge of the camp.

"Do you even know why you're here?" I curiously asked.

"Not yet," the Grey Pilgrim said.

I snorted. Fucking heroes.

"You asked me what my contingencies were, once," I said. "You're about to see one."

And at the edge of the wards, the two of us stood in the dark until Creation was opened with a slice and a dark-clad man strode through the opening. He smiled at seeing me. I smiled back.

"Welcome back, Hierophant," I said.

Interlude: Theism

"Seventy-four: if your lover does not have martial training have a rescue plan ready and waiting, as the eventual abduction by your nemesis is essentially inevitable."

– 'Two Hundred Heroic Axioms', author unknown

Klaus breathed out, quashing all hesitation, and struck.

The axe-blade bit deep into the skull, killing Ratbiter before the horse realized what was happening. The Bremen *stampfen* dropped, mercifully, but the spray of blood still went high and hot. Messy thing killing a horse, even when done right. Some would have said that the Prince of Hannover should have ceded the duty to another, that the arm he'd lost in the fall of Hainaut would make a clean kill harder, but he'd refused. Klaus Papenheim had ridden that horse through death and doom too long to let someone else swing the axe. Wiping the bloodspray off his cheek,

the prince knelt by his old friend's corpse and laid a hand on the unmoving flank.

"Rest, old friend," the Prince of Hannover murmured in Reitz. "And if there is a place for you on the other side, I will find you there."

Klaus Papenheim was, in the end, Lycaonese. He'd miss Ratbiter, but he would not burden the army with a lame horse. His people knew well that hesitation in the face of the dead only deepened the losses, and the virtues of pragmatism had been ground deep into their common soul. Sentiment was of no use from the grave, or from the uglier end of walking death. The old general forced himself up, feeling his knees groan under the weight. Behind him, two bodyguards and a pack of army cooks were waiting.

"Butcher and skin him," the Prince of Hannover ordered. "Throw the bones and offal in the disposal pit."

Pitch and magefire would make sure the Dead King found nothing there to use. Klaus passed the axe's handle to one of his bodyguard – Dieter, whose scarred scalp had turned white as he became just another boy aged too soon by this infernal war – and strode away. His steps took him down the slope, towards the heart of the beleaguered army's camp as his bodyguards followed in his wake. His parents would have disapproved of it, his leaving. If they'd thought they glimpsed squeamishness they would have made him watch, if not take up a skinning knife himself. *A Papenheim cannot hesitate*, Father had always said. *A crown is a cage of hard choices*, Mother had whispered, tucking him in a child.

Both had set out to burn weakness out of him so that Hannover would not perish under his watch.

The white-haired prince almost smiled. It'd been many years since he had last thought of Ludwig and Sieglinde Papenheim, neither of which were remembered fondly by many of their kin. Klaus had come to understand, as a ruler in his own right, that much of what had seemed cruelty as a child had in truth been cold pragmatism of the breed necessary to survive at Keter's gate. He'd even come to be grateful for the hard lessons, in time. Yet the passing of the years had not made him love the imperious and high-handed pair any more than he had whilst they still lived. Ironically enough, he figured neither would have minded: what did his aversion matter to them, when their ways had become his just as they had wished? Some legacies were insidious, he'd learned, and all the harder to shake for their quiet creep.

There were songs, among Klaus' people, about the love he'd borne for his late wife. How even as a man in his prime he'd never considered remarrying. The truth was not as clean as that. Part of why Klaus had never remarried after Suse's death had been his many failings as a father. He had, without even noticing, become

his parents come again. No wonder Wilfried had pressed that charge too far against the rattlings: when had he ever smiled at his eldest save when the boy came back bloodied and victorious? And Gregor, his sweet secondborn he'd tried to harden for the days ahead, had hidden the sickness until it'd been much too late for even the priests.

Would he have, if he'd not been convinced his own father saw him as a weakling?

And so Klaus had decided he would not fail any more children, that legacy would die with him. Margaret had been the one to draw him out of the darkness of those days, after she gave birth to her own little daughter. His sister had been a hesitant mother, and sometimes distant, but rarely unkind: in this she had fared the best of the House of Hasenbach. All it'd taken was for Klaus to hold that bundle named Cordelia in his arms once and he'd been lost, besotted with the little blonde curls and at the laughing eyes. She'd been a merry child, his niece. Prone to gurgling at strangers and trying to eat her uncle's beard.

More than once Klaus had found his hand reaching for ink and quill, after the talk that had buried their closeness. Where the First Prince of Procer had sent him to fight and die and Hainaut, ordered him to abandon the principality – the people! – he'd sworn to defend. Always he'd drawn back at the last moment, and only official reports had left for Salia. Yet he often found himself writing that letter in his mind, when he had a spare moment. Bits and pieces of it. *Sometimes, niece, you remind me of your grandfather*, Klaus would write if he took the quill today. *When I was a boy of nine, Prince Ludwig Papenheim ordered the town of Ebelburg burned when he heard ratling warbands were two hours away.*

If he hadn't, the townsfolk would have insisted on fighting and standing their ground, the white-haired prince wrote in his mind. *They would have said the children could not run quick enough, that the elderly would not survive the trip. Instead he had torches thrown, and four hundred people were saved. They did not thank him for it, Cordelia.*

Klaus still remembered the soldiers talking when they returned to Hannover, the way they'd described his father. Carved in iron, they'd said, and it had been as much invective as praise. Yet they had respected him for it, he remembered. Even the townsfolk he'd burned out of their own homes and brought back to his capital even as a larger force assembled to drive back the rattlings. *So I understand it, the decision*, Klaus Papenheim silently penned. *It's in our blood. But I am the townsfolk of my childhood, niece. I cannot thank you for having ordered the torches thrown at Hannover.* The old prince knew his home would have fallen even if he'd ridden out to defend it. He'd read the

maps, counted the days. Hannoven had been doomed the moment this war began.

And yet Klaus Papenheim had not been there to fight for it, and this he could not forgive himself – or anybody else.

The old general found his tent nestled near the bottom of the hill, surrounded by sworn swords from Hannoven. There the rest of their makeshift war council still held session, sifting through heap of troubles that the last bloody push to take the town of Juvelun from the dead had brought down on them. His second, Princess Mathilda Greensteel of Neustria, was sharing the table with Captain Nabila of Alava – a short, stout woman with a heavily painted face – as the Dominion's man and Prince Arsene of Bayeux held down his own corner as the voice for the Alamans and the fantassins.

The last two men stood for smaller forces, but in their own way crucial ones: freshly back from healing the White Knight sat with a pleasant smile as he methodically ate his way through an apple, commander of all Named with the army. For the Damned it was the Barrow Sword that had been elected to stand. Klaus counted the man a rogue and a vicious specimen of the breed, but he was also solid in a fight and a devil against Revenants – the Prince of Hannoven was willing to forgive much in favour of that. The Dominion villain often clashed with Captain Nabila, but it seemed more like sparring than the venom Catherine Foundling had warned him might ensue.

The Gods only knew where General Rumena had gotten to, for it came and went as it pleased, but in its absence it had left behind a dark-skinned drow that spoke perfect Chantant and called itself Mighty Sagasbord. It was both habitually sardonic and eerily knowing, which usually made for good advice unpleasant to hear.

"- then we should split our forces and strike now, else the enemy will delay us further," Captain Nabila insisted.

"We're still uncertain how many escaped into the valley," Prince Arsene skeptically replied. "We could be headed into-"

"She's right," Klaus cut in, striding into the tent.

The splatter of blood on him got a few surprised looks as he lowered himself into a seat at the table, but nothing more. Everyone here had gotten their hands bloody taking Juvelun, and if they were to survive this trap it wouldn't be the last time.

"Dare we hope for an elaboration, Prince Klaus?" the Prince of Bayeux testily asked.

"We took the town but the dead retreated in good order," the Prince of Hannover replied. "It could be ten thousand made it out, it could be thirty thousand. Either way, every drifting warband in the central valley of Hainaut will be headed that way now. If we don't strike before the enemy musters up properly, we'll lose the battle ahead of us."

It'd taken three days and night of brutal fighting before Juvelun fell, the ditches and walls dug by the dead stormed at all too high a cost. Yet there'd been no final keep to assail, no last redoubt: instead the undead had retreated under cover of night, leaving behind a token force for the drow under General Rumena to annihilate. Though their scouts had insisted that a hundred thousand undead had been holed up in Juvelun, in practice the Prince of Hannover suspected they'd fought around seventy thousand at most. The rest had been kept back, and most likely were down in the valley preparing to prevent Klaus' army from linking up with the Black Queen's. Should the enemy succeed in that design, no one in this tent would still be drawing breath by the moon's turn. They'd make a fight of it, the Prince of Hannover knew, but it'd be a defeat engraved in stone.

"Strike hard, then keep moving," the Barrow Sword approvingly said. "A sound notion."

Dominion officers always thought like raiders, the old general deplored. It wasn't always a weakness, as there were similarities between the glorified raids that the Levantines called 'honour wars' and an offensive into enemy territory. But the distances and numbers involved meant a lot of their instincts pulled them the wrong way. It'd been too long since the Dominion of Levant had been in a real war, one that didn't end with a summer's fighting and a few promises traded between Blood.

They lost the learning, Klaus thought. The Army of Callow had gone through a bevy of rough campaigns and sharpened the skills with war schools while Procer had been given a refresher in the art by the Great War and the latest round of the Uncivil Wars, but the Dominion had nothing of the sort. All their learning was done on the field, with bloody costs for every mistake.

"We're not in fighting fit for a pitched battle," Princess Mathilda of Neustria bluntly said. "It's been a day since we took the town and the priests are still overwhelmed with wounded. We lost a dozen soldiers to *infections* this morning because the healers would have died if they kept drawing on Light."

"I forced the Stalwart Apostle to drink a concoction that'd make her sleep," the White Knight admitted. "She'd still be in the tents otherwise, and burned out permanently."

She was a good kid that one, Klaus thought. A little soft and with too much faith the Heavens would swoop down and fix everything, but prayer had never gone amiss when things got dark.

"Exactly," Prince Arsene said. "Are we to send forces into a battle without priests and mages, Your Grace, or consign wounded to death so that our hasty vanguard is not bare of protection?"

This is why your people lost the Great War, Prince Klaus Papenheim thought. Why none of you were able to win it, beyond the Tower's manipulations. None of you were willing to pay what it would have cost you.

"We will consign wounded to die," the Iron Prince flatly said. "If the Enemy still has swarms to spare, we would be facing a potential wipe without priests and mages to compensate."

"The Witch of the Woods-"

"- will do what she can, but cannot be relied on," Mathilda Greensteel interrupted the White Knight, nodding at Klaus. "If Revenants come after her, the protections she has to offer will not be enough."

"This is *madness*," Prince Arsene insisted. "We are to leave our own to die and risk it all on battle with a force we know little about?"

"Would you prefer to be besieged in this lovely ruin of a town?" the Barrow Sword drily asked.

"Yes," Prince Arsene emphatically replied. "We still have supplies for a few days – more, perhaps, considering our losses – and if we dig in the Black Queen can come relieve us as soon as she has secured the Cigelin Sisters."

"What impressive eagerness to die," Mighty Sagasbord noted, laying its chin on its palm. "Your confidence surprises, Prince of Man. We took this Juvelun from a numerically superior force, yet you now believe that should we be besieged by an enemy many times our greater we will prevail?"

"Our men are worth easily three of the dead," Prince Arsene harshly said, pride clearly stung. "*Ours* anyway, dark elf."

"No Firstborn will ever take your life, Prince of Man," Mighty Sagasbord smiled, without a single speck of friendliness to it.

The Alamans prince looked surprised and confused, but those more familiar with the ways of the Firstborn winced at the bald insult. The drow ate the skills and knowledge of those they slew, Klaus knew, so the Mighty had been implying that there was

nothing worth taking from Arsene of Bayeux. Best to step in before this went further astray, the Prince of Hannover thought.

"We might be able to hold the down, if we can put up defences before the dead arrive," Klaus admitted. "For a few days. But they won't fight us, Prince Arsene. They will surround us and wait us out instead. The Hidden Horror is patient, he will starve us into the grave."

The army that'd come out of Malmedit like devils pouring out of a Hellgate was not far behind them. Three, four days at most. If Klaus' army stayed in Juvelun, it risked annihilation: the enemy in the valley would pen it in from the west, the great host of Malmedit from the east. If that happened, even using a pharos device to escape wouldn't be enough. The dead would strike in force the moment the gates opened, on both flanks, and the more of Klaus' soldiers made it into the Twilight Ways the higher the risk of those staying in Creation being overwhelmed by sheer numbers and horrors.

They'd ran the games, him and the Marshal of Callow. Any army trying to evacuate through the Twilight Ways while giving battle was facing at least half its number in losses, and more frequently up to two thirds. There came a tipping point early in the process that made it impossible to maintain cohesion in the ranks, and the moment panic set in a massacre was inevitable. No, Klaus Papenheim would not allow the enemy to slip that noose around his neck. Better the wounded perish today that a hundred times their number tomorrow.

"The Black Queen's column will relieve us," Prince Arsene pointed out. "With her numbers-"

"She does not have the supplies to feed us, Your Grace," the White Knight calmly said. "Her force is even larger than ours, and stretched the Grand Alliance's capacity to supply. Even if she empties all her stores, all she can accomplish is join us in our starvation after a few more days."

The Prince of Bayeux's face soured, but he argued no further. The man was overly cautious, but not a fool. He understood what a combined army of over a hundred thousand, surrounded and far behind enemy lines without any supply lines, meant in practice. The Prince of Hannover's insistence to take Juvelun had not been, contrary to what some wagging fantassin tongues insinuated, out of desire for a victory to gild his name. The other choices had all been worse: either turning back to the defensive line, and so tossing the Black Queen's army to the wolves, or allowing a massive army of two hundred thousand to march down on threadbare defensive lines.

By taking Juvelun and smashing the army holding it, Klaus had forced the Malmedit army to pursue him west into the valley. He'd

bled his army achieving this, but it was better than the disaster that would be the destruction of Catherine Foundling's army or the end of Procer that the defensive lines breaking would represent.

"I have voiced my thoughts on what must be done," Captain Nabila said. "And I do not take back these words. Yet I add this: if there is no appetite for the fight, we must withdraw. Take to the Twilight Ways and leave. I will not swear the warriors of Alava to a desperate end in Juvelun."

Prince Klaus kept his face calm. That had been, however delicately put, a threat that if the army stayed in Juvelun the Levantines would take to the Twilight Ways and leave them all behind. His control over the coalition was slipping, the old general realized. Eyes turned to Prince Arsene of Bayeux, whose face had grown conflicted. The man, Klaus knew, did not enjoy being at odds with most of the table when it came to making war plans. But he saw it as his duty to speak not only for the soldiers of Bayeux and Brabant but also for the fantassins companies, which meant espousing their causes even when they were unpopular with other commanders.

"I'm not certain if an order to march towards another battle would be followed," the fair-haired prince admitted. "My men will follow me, but the Brabant conscripts have been unruly since Prince Etienne died and half the fantassins are mutinous. They were hard used with the breaches on the second day, and have not forgot it."

"Alava led the charge on the first, and the Lycaonese on the third," Captain Nabila harshly said. "What sets them apart from us, I wonder?"

The appearance of cowardice was like throwing red meat at a starving dog, for Levantines. They couldn't resist sinking their teeth in it, and they were especially quick to point those fingers when it came to Alamans.

"The hardest defences to assail were the second day's," the Iron Prince acknowledged. "And their losses were significant. I have not forgotten that."

The other prince looked relieved.

"It is not mutiny, Your Grace," Prince Arsene said. "Your command is not contested. They have simply reached their limits."

It was a mutiny, whether the other man wanted to admit it or not. It was simply not yet an open one, not that illusion would survive his giving an order. The rank and file did not understand why they were here fighting and dying, could not grasp the broader theatre of war. That was why trust between soldiers and

generals was so important: they had to trust in the person commanding them to steer them right even if they could not understand what was being done and why. It now seemed like trust in Klaus Papenheim was running out. What was it that'd done him in, he wondered – the darkly comical march to and away from Malmedit, or the brutal fighting taking a heavily defended town seemingly in the middle of nowhere? Either way, the horse had grown lame from the hard riding.

"They must be made to understand what is at stake," the Iron Prince said. "Gather the officers for me, Prince Arsene. I will address them personally."

The other man looked unconvinced. Klaus did not have a reputation as much of an orator, it was true. The only vote he'd ever personally cast in the Chamber of Assembly instead of letting an *assermenté* do it for him had been the one that'd put his niece on the high throne. Still, Prince Arsene nodded in assent. Likely he figured that after the old general failed to sway the vacillating captains discussion of a compromise could begin in earnest.

"Let us part ways until then," Klaus said. "There is no need for further discussion."

The Prince of Bayeux took his leave, and after a lingering look Captain Nabila did the same. Mathilde slowed as she passed by his seat.

"Veitland?" the Princess of Neustria asked.

"Hauptberg," the Prince of Hannover replied.

She nodded, and strode away without another word. Nothing more needed to be said. Klaus found that the Barrow Sword was looking at them, eyes considering.

"Nabila is young to the Lord of Alava's service, did you know," the bearded Damned casually said. "Only a decade as one of his captains, most of them spent far from Yannu Marave himself. She rose to her position on merit, not closeness or years."

"She has proved a fine officer," Klaus replied, for it was true.

"There's a reason she held borders, back home, and did not stay at her lord's side," the Barrow Sword smiled. "In Levant, authority flows from either Blood or blood."

The Prince of Hannover met the other man's gaze, unblinking. It would take more than cryptic talk from a mouthy grave robber to impress him.

"I do wonder how you'd do there, Iron Prince," the Damned chuckled.

Someone, Klaus thought, ought to have beaten the smugness out of that man by now. He gave no reply to the villain, who seemed to take it as a victory and left the tent. Behind stayed only the White Knight, whose look of unruffled patience had not changed a whit.

"You have something to say?" Klaus asked.

"The Enemy breathes down our necks," the White Knight said. "I do not understand its great designs, for I am no general, but the jaws of the trap are closing on us. That much I can sense."

"We reach the turning point soon," Klaus quietly agreed. "One way or another. There is a battle taking shape in Hainaut that will decide the fate of the Principate."

"Not here in Juvelun," the White Knight mused. "It has not come together properly. And you might be surprised, Prince Klaus, by the roar of this army should it allow itself to be surrounded here. There is a... power behind such stands. Even more so when there is salvation on the way, awaiting the darkest hour to deliver dawn."

"There are not many things I would not trust the swords of the Lycaonese to prevail over, White Knight," the Iron Prince replied, "but steel cannot triumph over hunger. There can be no victory over an empty belly."

"So I've gathered," the dark-skinned Chosen amiably replied. "And so now we must prepare for the storms on the horizon and pray that the most terrible of our allies will come to our aid."

The old general stared at the other man, wondering at the tone used when speaking of the hero's equal and opposite under the Terms. He'd never put any stock in the rumours about the Black Queen and the White Knight, but like many he'd always been unsettled by the cordiality between the two of them. Often the warmth in the voices when they spoke of each other had startled him, but now he heard no hint of it in the White Knight's words. There had been a distancing there, he thought. Not enmity, but a cooling of relations. Merciful Gods, what was it that'd really happened in the Arsenal?

The rumours spread by the dozen, each wilder and more fanciful than the last, but truth was in short supply.

"We will have order," Klaus Papenheim simply said. "And we will march west, as we must."

"I expect we will," the White Knight tiredly said. "I will ready my Named for the march, Iron Prince."

The white-haired prince looked askance at the other man, almost surprise.

"That is all?" he said.

"I do not judge," Hanno of Arwad said, rising to his feet. "This has not changed, and never will."

The Chosen left the tent after offering a small bow, not speaking another word, and Klaus dragged himself upright once more. His day was far from over. The old prince attended to the army of Hannover, speaking to his captains and preparing them for what was to come, and awaited the word of the Prince of Bayeux. Yet it was not another Proceran who came for him first but something altogether more eldritch. General Rumena, the only drow in all of the army come south to bear such the title, was stooped and old in a way that Firstborn never were. It was ancient, Klaus knew, in a way that it was hard to truly understand.

The fucker was also a bastard soldier of the old breed, so Klaus Papenheim had never found him difficult to deal with. He'd yet to manage to talk the other general into no longer invading his tent whenever it felt like it, but aside from that their relationship had been rather amiable from the start.

"You have something for me?" the Prince of Hannover asked.

Complaining about the habitual intrusion would be wasted time in a day that already had too few hours.

"We went down to have a look in the valley," General Rumena agreed. "The dead gather, Hannover Prince. The valley had been stripped bare of warbands – Losara Queen's work, I wager – but the dead salvaged a host from the fall of Juvelun. Perhaps thirty thousand, though they are not yet properly mustered for battle."

Klaus grimaced at the news. He'd hoped for closer to twenty thousand, fool's hope as it had been. That much could have been handled without leaning too heavily on the Alamans to supply soldiers for the force that would sally out.

"How long do we have?"

The wrinkled and grey-skinned creature considered that a moment.

"The dusk of tomorrow," the drow finally said. "They will be ready for war then, and waiting for you. The disarray from the fall of Juvelun will last no longer than that."

Klaus stiffly nodded.

"My thanks," he said. "Will your sigils be in fighting fit tonight?"

"We always are," General Rumena smiled unpleasantly. "Chno Sve Noc."

"So your lot keep telling me," the Iron Prince grunted back. "Get ready for a strike after dark. We can't afford to linger here much longer."

"Do your people not have a saying about the weakest link?" General Rumena mused.

"A curse," Klaus corrected. "May you be the weakest link in the Chain of Hunger."

"Yes," the old drow nodded. "That is not us, Hannover Prince. See to your own sigils, before speaking of dragging feet."

And just as boldly as it'd slipping into his tent, the Firstborn strolled out after seizing the last word. Klaus could have fought it, but what would be the point? Better to let it keep its prize and remain pacified. His pride was not so overgrown as to be unable to tolerate the occasional pointed quip from a peer. It still took half a bell after that for the Prince of Bayeux to send a messenger to him, giving word that the other royal had at last gathered the captains in need of swaying. The reason for the delay became clear when the Prince of Hannover headed to the pavilion mention by the messenger.

That it was a *pavilion* and not a simple tent where the talks were to be had said much about the numbers involved.

Twenty handpicked Hannover armsmen followed him inside, his bodyguard, but there must have been almost a hundred men and women already packed tight within. Fantassins captains, mostly, but many peasant officers from the Brabant conscripts as well. Prince Arsene himself stood to the side with a handful of bodyguards, as if to make it clear he was not one of the wavering souls. From the start Klaus found that the mood within was mutinous. He spoke clearly and concisely, avoiding frills and japes out of respect for the grim deeds he was asking for, but twice he was interrupted by a challenge from a captain and more often than that by jeers.

"To stay in Juvelun is death," the Prince of Hannover told them. "We will be surrounded and destroyed."

"And where would we go instead, bloody Keter?" a woman called out.

"Retreat," another voice called out. "We must *retreat*."

"We must go west," Klaus roared, his voice rising above the din. "General Rumena has reported to me that the remnants from the defenders of Juvelun are gathering in the valley, and we must

strike west to disperse them before they can mount a true threat."

The shouts of dismay were deafening, interwoven with jeers and calls for retreat or holing up in the town. There would be no convincing them, the Prince of Hannover thought. It was Prince Arsene who called the crowd to order, in the end.

"Hauptberg," the Iron Prince spoke into the silence, "is the name of a town two days away from the Morgentor by horse."

His bodyguards had closed ranks around him when the crowd had grown wild and stayed in formation since.

"My people," Klaus Papenheim said, "know it as where the first of the Iron Kings, Alrich Fenne, was crowned ruler of all Lycaonese before smashing the ratling hordes in Twilight's Pass."

There had been seven kingdoms back then, though in time they became the four modern principalities of the north. But the first of the Iron Kings had not used to sweet words to convince the other royals to kneel to him, on that day. The truth was altogether bloodier. On the last day of the talks held at Hauptberg, none of the kings had been willing to swear to another and stand as a single force against the implacable foe coming their way.

And so Alrich Fenne had, in the dark of night, killed them all.

"Sometimes," the old general said, "someone has to order the torches thrown."

He curtly brought his hand down and the head of his bodyguards screamed out the order. Like a tide of steel, soldiers of Hannover and Neustria began pouring into the pavilion.

"Arrest those who kneel," the Iron Prince ordered. "Kill the rest."

Interlude: Ietsism

"There is a natural order to the world and the peoples of the world must reflect it through law. Should all serve as ordained by the Heavens, all of Creation will be as a garden without sin."

– Extract from 'Ten Scales', by Madrubal the Wise

They were not alone out here.

Leaning against the tall rock, the White Knight reached for the coin that was never far from his hand and palmed it, deftly sliding it between his thumb and forefinger. With a satisfying

twang it went spinning upwards and for a heartbeat his heart soared before he mastered it. His fear was proved true a heartbeat later, as the coin ceased spinning at the apex and simply hung there as if frozen in amber. After a few heartbeats, it simply dropped down and back onto his palm. At no point did either the laurels or the swords take primacy, as the Hierarch of the Free Cities would brook not even the shadow of a verdict to be passed while he watched. Flicking his wrist with a defeated sigh, Hanno of Arwad disappeared the coin once more.

"Stern Singers again silent, huh," Rafaella said, peering down at him from atop the stone.

"Anaxares the Diplomat is proving to be remarkably obstructive man," Hanno replied with forced calm.

And on occasion he had proved more than simply that. That over the last three months the coin had begun to occasionally be seized instead of simply inert had been worrying enough, for not even the Grey Pilgrim knew whether it meant that the Hierarch was fading with a last hurrah or *gaining ground* against the Seraphim. Rather more troubling had been the word that'd come to Hanno that for the first year after the Peace of Salia, the heads of Bellerophans who had broken the city's laws had taken to spontaneously exploding. Not for every infraction, but frequently enough that rumours had spread out of even the famously closed republic. The madman had succeeded at arrogating the powers of the Choir of Judgement, if only for a brief time.

"Bellerophon like bag of wet cats," the Valiant Champion sympathetically said. "Never good idea to put hand in."

"So I've been told," the White Knight mildly said.

Catherine had graciously refrained from reminding him that she'd attempt to warn him off the course of action that had seen the Choir of Judgement sealed whenever they disagreed, but Tariq had not been shy in voicing his own opinions. *Evil knows Evil in ways that we cannot*, the Grey Pilgrim had chided him. *To refuse expertise leant in good faith is not wisdom, it is vanity*. Hanno had accepted the reproach for it was: not the lesson of a would-be mentor, which he would have cared little for, but the frank assessment of a peer. Few ever cared to offer those to him, which made such talks all the more precious.

"It seems our friends are not biting today," Hanno added, changing the subject. "Any sign of the Hawk?"

"Just Wolfhound," Rafaella sighed. "And he still boring loaf."

Hanno cocked an eyebrow.

"Loafer?" he suggested. "Or perhaps oaf?"

"This too," the Valiant Champion agreed.

Rafaella turned to look downslope, among the rocky expanse leading into the valley where central Hainaut awaited, and waved her greataxe eye-catchingly.

"Hear this, Wolfhound?" she yelled. "Fight me!"

The White Knight, though mildly amused, was now forced to admit that their little incursion looked like a wash. He'd thought it possible to bait the trickiest of the Scourges now that the camp was about to look vulnerable, but the Hawk had refused to bite. Even putting out the Young Slayer as well as the Valiant Champion had not moved to Revenant to try an attack. Hanno pressed against the stone to his side with his boot, and with a heave gave himself just enough momentum he was able to leap out of the dip where he'd been waiting and join Rafaella atop the stone. Further downslope, the sculpted iron helm of the Wolfhound could be glimpsed among the rocks as the Revenant studied them unmoving.

He seemed unmoved at the notion of being alone around three Named with significant bite to them, not that Hanno was surprised. Of all the Scourges, that one had proved the hardest to put down save perhaps the Prince of Bones. Not that 'Scourges' were a formal band of any kind, mind you. They were, in essence, a loose designation for the Revenants that the heroes fighting on the lakeside fronts found to be the greatest threats. Each among the greatest of their kinds, they were considered to require either a full band of five or one of the greatest champions of the Grand Alliance to handle. Who actually counted among their number was the subject of lively campfire debate, though there were at least ten that all agreed on.

Nine now, Hanno mentally corrected, if word about the Stitcher being destroyed by the Firstborn was to be believed.

"Slayer," the White Knight called out, "return. We're done here."

There was no sign of movement until the young hero seemingly popped out between stones, stalking towards the two heroes without a sound to his steps. The Young Slayer was tall for a Levantine and unusually slender as well, but the lithe build lent a grace to his movements that was almost fluid. Armed with a slayer's arsenal, all hooked swords and darts and ropes, the dark-haired youth was among the more promising of the upcoming heroes. One of his aspects allowed him to most forms of armour as he cut, which had proved deadly against Revenants preferring close range. He was also something of a political headache, as it happened, which was why he'd been assigned to Hanno's care.

The Young Slayer came from a family rival to the Osenas, the descendants in Blood of the Silent Slayer, but had come into a Name that was widely considered to be the transitional one

leading into the highly regarded Name of Silent Slayer. For the Osenas this was something of an embarrassment, and though Lady Aquiline Osenas had not proved outright hostile to the young hero she'd also made it clear there was no place with him in the ranks of the warriors of Tartessos. Hanno had promptly passed him into Rafaella's care as much for the shared heritage as the fact that the Valiant Champion had managed to remain on good terms with Lord Yannu of the Champion's Blood without being married into the Maraves.

"Our hunt was fruitless, Lord White," the Young Slayer sighed as he returned to their side. "For all we know, the Hawk is—"

Providence nudged at Hanno's hand before his senses could, and he followed the current without resistance. His sword left the scabbard in a clean, crisp arc and cut through the arrow a hair's breadth beyond the arrowhead. The Young Slayer flinched, the harmless steel arrowhead falling against his leathers with a slap instead of piercing through the back of his neck.

"Hawk still there," Rafaella cheerfully noted.

"As a rule, it is unwise to tempt irony without being prepared to meet the consequences of it," Hanno calmly told the younger man. "When you have come into the fullness of your might perhaps you will find the opposite tack to your liking, as it can prompt the Enemy to move at the timing of your choice, but until then I would advise a more restrained approach."

The Young Slayer swallowed loudly.

"I understand, Lord White," he feebly said, making the Mark of Mercy against his chest.

Promising but still so very young, Hanno thought as he sheathed his sword. There was still no sign of the Hawk out there, and now even the Wolfhound had disappeared into the rocks. Fighting against the Revenant he believed had been an Archer whilst she still drew breath had made the White Knight dimly grateful for having never fought the Woe in earnest. For all that the powers of the Black Queen and the Hierophant drew the eye the most, he suspected that it was Indrani the Archer that would have been the deadliest of the lot. The Hawk — named for the feathers she liked to fletch her arrows with — had certainly proved to be among the most lethal of the Scourges.

Christophe would have died during the taking of Juvelun if the Stalwart Apostle had not been by his side, and Prince Etienne of Brabant *had* died. The Hawk might not be as visibly destructive as the Archmage or the Unseelie, but she'd done more damage to the army than either so far. While Antigone fought the former and Hanno the latter, the Hawk had set about methodically killing her way through the captains and commanders of the Grand Alliance's

army. It was the Hawk's head that the White Knight had been hoping to take today, betting on the disorder of the camp being enough to tempt her into an attack. Yet it seemed she was not to be baited into exposing herself.

The deadly arrows would resume when they went on the march, then.

"Back to camp," the White Knight ordered. "We've lingered out here long enough. Best be gone before they bring in other Revenants and the hunt turns around on us."

It was not a long walk, but it somehow felt like it anyway.

—

While Hanno had not reddened his blade today, the same could not be said of others. The pavilion had collapsed, its drapes drenched with blood. Half a hundred men and women, several bruised and cut, knelt outside in the mud surrounded by a ring of bared swords. Behind them Lycaonese armsmen, bearing the colours of Neustria and Hannover, set to the work of dragging away the corpses with brisk efficiency. Few of the northerners had died in the ambush, having gone in fully armed and ready while most of the Alamans captains had kept swords and daggers but few bothered with even chainmail. Not a quarter hour had passed since the last of the steel was sheathed, but already the camp was like a kettle about to boil over.

Rumours had flown with swift wings, for the Iron Prince's seizure and killing of the mutinous officers had been impossible to hide. Already two fantassin companies had holed themselves up behind their carts and hollered loudly at treachery and breach of contract, but they would not be the last. Lycaonese respected ruthlessness suborned to greater purpose, and in matters of law the Prince of Hannover had been within his rights, but to southerners this was a grave overreach. Hanno had already sent the Balladeer and the Harrowed Witch, two of the more level-headed among his Named, to prevent that particular situation from spinning out of control.

Respect for the Chosen would stay hand and the Balladeer was highly popular besides, while the Witch had the means to quickly send word to him if need be. In truth, though, the White Knight did not believe that this would escalate much beyond the current trouble. The Prince of Hannover had been hard-handed but also clear-sighted. There was no real support for the would-be mutineers among the broader army: the Lycaonese remained loyal to their rulers, the Levantines seemed to approve more than not and the Firstborn were either indifferent or amused. Hanno had spoken with their General Rumena on several occasions over the last month, and found the ancient drow to be contemptuously amused with what it deemed to be 'human foibles'.

Its interest in the politics of its allies began and ended at their intersection with the interests of the Firstborn.

The Barrow Sword's footsteps were not as quiet as the man believed them to be, but Hanno did not give it away until the bearded villain was almost close enough to be struck. Rafaella had twice warned him of how dangerous this one truly was, and she was not one to hand out such praise easily. She'd also had a few unkind words about the Black Queen's protection of him, but then Hanno figured that the Barrow Sword would have had a few of the same to Catherine Foundling about his own protection of the Valiant Champion. That tended to be the way, with the Truce and Terms.

"Ishaq," the White Knight acknowledged without turning. "Come to have a look?"

"Something like that," the other man drawled. "Wasn't sure the old man had it in him, truth be told."

More the fool you, Hanno thought. The Lycaonese were a strange folk at first glance, but not so difficult to understand when studied in depth. In some ways their culture was more permissive than that of the Alamans and the Arlesites, especially when it came to privacy – though with the unspoken understanding that anything done in private could not be a danger to the community – and mores, but their land had made them a hard people. None of the northern soldiery had been affronted by the Iron Prince's ambush today because, in their eyes, it was his undeniable right to act this way. They had never taken fully to Salienta's Graces, up north, where instead it was strong rulers and hard choices that were trusted to get them through the dark.

The Iron Prince had never acted the tyrant before because he'd never seen a need to. It was as simple as that. Not all ruthless men needed to trumpet about their ruthlessness.

"It will be settled soon," Hanno said.

The Barrow Sword let out a noise of disbelief.

"There's four companies barricaded now," Ishaq said. "And there'll be more, mark my words. He only sent a few envoys there to inform them their officers had been arrested for high treason and they must set down their arms before letting them stew. He's lucky they didn't lynch any of them. Not the williest of schemers, our Prince of Hannover."

Hanno glanced at the other man, whose neatly-trimmed beard and elegantly subdued facepaint were both twisted by a jeer as he watched the bodies being stripped naked and dragged to the disposal pits. The Levantine villain did not seem to share the enmity much of his countrymen held for Procerans, but his general

callous disregard for life meant there was little difference in practice.

"Not a schemer," the White Knight agreed. "Yet not a fool. Where are the rest of the Hannover armymen, Barrow Sword, if they are neither here nor forcing the fantassins in line?"

Pale brown eyes flicked to him, narrowing in thought.

"Ah," the Barrow Sword exhaled. "The conscripts. Not a fool indeed, while I have been yapping my jaw like one instead."

Hanno bent his head in acknowledgement. The Prince of Hannover had, correctly he believed, decided that the conscripts would be easier to get in line and so focused his efforts there. It went with the way Brabantines – and many Alamans armies – appointed their officers. A prince would usually name most his relatives and closest highborn allies to a command, but when the stock of those and trusted career soldiers were exhausted it was tradition for levies and conscripts to elect their officers from their own ranks. Given the high rates of attrition and the realities of raising an army by conscription, it had in truth been mostly lowborn captains who'd been in the tent.

And so by seizing or killing the Brabantine captains in the tent, Klaus Papenheim had effectively removed all the men and women who would have had the popularity and leadership to rouse the conscripts into organized resistance against him. His actions would still breed deep resentment and involved killing trusted officers shortly before seeking a pitched battle, but for now though the conscripts were mutinous they were a disorganized sort of mutinous. The kind that could be herded into companies and forced to prepare for a march west by Lycaonese soldiers, as was currently taking place while the fantassins failed to realize they were being isolated.

It wasn't that the Iron Prince was unaware that a third of the camp now despised him, Hanno mused, but that in the old prince's eyes that mattered little if no one here was alive to hate him in a week. He was not wrong in this.

"I take it we're not going to intervene either way?" the Barrow Sword asked.

Hanno almost smiled. The man's reason for seeking him out finally became clear.

"There will not be a need," the White Knight said. "I have sent Antigone and Christophe to oversee the capitulation of the conscripts, and anything other than our visible presence would be interference beyond our mandate."

The Barrow Sword turned to study him for a long moment.

"Huh," Ishaq idly said. "Thought you'd be up in arms about all the killing, White Knight. It seemed like the kind of turn you might flip a coin over. So to speak."

Hanno turned to level a calm stare on the villain, who met it defiantly. He said nothing, simply waiting in silence until the other man looked away.

"No offence meant," the Barrow Sword said.

"Of course," the White Knight mildly replied. "A good evening to you then, Ishaq."

The bearded man balked at the implied dismissal but did not contest it. It would have been easier, Hanno suspected, if they had fought. It would have allowed the Barrow Sword to place him as the more powerful among them, and so end the incessant challenges that uncertainty in this matter drove him to attempt. Yet Hanno was a high officer of the Grand Alliance, and the Barrow Sword was not one of the Named in his charge. Duelling the villain, even if Catherine would likely end up excusing the matter, would be an act with repercussions. Gods but there were a great many of those, these days. His world had grown increasingly complicated since the inception of the Truce and Terms.

Duties had grown like weeds even as old certainties now passed like sand through his fingers. Hanno reached for the coin that was never far from his palm, though it had never been found by another, and closed his fingers around the silver. Laurels on one side, crossed swords on the other. The only verdict the Seraphim ever cared to give. Watching the corpses be dragged away in silence, the White Knight casually flipped it. It spun, a blink of silver, and landed on his open palm without anything beyond Creation's laws having moved it. A relief, almost. At least it was not a spurt of the Hierarch's madness again. It still left him feeling unpleasantly blind.

It was not that the White Knight believed himself to be unschooled in matters of law or in matters of right and wrong. He knew better. His interest in both matters – sometimes aligned, sometimes opposed – had begun early. As a boy, Hanno had once been a court scribe for the Outer Tribunal of Arwad. The courthouse of Halan District had been a minor one even among the lesser of the Thalassocracy's two tribunals, but it had often deal with foreigners and their laws, as well as possessed a surprisingly large scrollhouse that the senior scribes and archivists had been lenient in allowing a young Hanno to use.

These days, when looking back in search of the first steps taken in becoming the man he was today, the White Knight had often lingered on that alignment of coincidences as a likely source. He had learned of many laws while quite young, not only those of his native Ashur but also those of Free Cities – Nicae and Delos,

mostly – as well the southernmost of the Proceran principalities. He had also seen judgement given day after day, the law measured and applied by the tribunes of the courthouse for which he had kept records. It had fostered in him an interest in justice and law long before injustice slew his father and befell his mother in the wake of that death.

He'd read the famous treatise on Ashuran law, the *Ten Scales* of Madrubal, as much out of curiosity as because he had nursed ambitions to one day become an archivist at the courthouse. That same abundance of knowledge had come close to leading him astray, when he had sought the Riddle of Fault and earned the attention of the Seraphim, so in a sense it was not without peril. It was all too easy to become drunk your own learning and confuse it with wisdom. Yet Hanno had continued to learn, over the years that followed, for though it was not his place to judge there was rarely virtue to be found in willful ignorance. And so he had sought knowledge of the laws of Calernia, sifting through them in search of wisdom.

He had found sense in some places, be they the graces the Principate granted to all from princes to beggars or the shrewdly even-handed way the Tower collected taxes, but always it had been... situational. Impermanent. Nothing at all like the timeless wisdom of the Choir of Judgement. And more often Hanno had found the laws twisted and turned into a tool of oppression by those who made them. The Magisterium of Stygia made property of men while calling it a godgiven right, Callowan nobles inherited the right to pass judgement along with their titles and Ashur in the same breath condemned slavery while buying foreign criminals whose sentences would be spent labouring in the Thalassocracy's mines.

Watching soldiers in mail drag butchered naked corpses away, Hanno considered justice. Law, it could not be denied, gave the right to Prince Klaus Papenheim. Yet justice was not the same thing, and it rarely nested on the side that dragged corpses into mass graves – for all that the appellation of 'disposal pits' tiptoed around that words, that was what they were in truth. No, Hanno would not put blind trust in laws. Men were flawed and that imperfection bled into all that they made it was the simple way of things. Even laws. *Especially* laws, perhaps. So the White Knight had observed those that he could while pursuing what he knew to be right, and ignored those that he must while doing the same.

It was a straightforward path, in a way. While he was as blind as anyone else on Creation, he'd had the light of the Choir of Judgement to heed and follow instead. That had removed uncertainty. Allowed for purity of purpose, if not always action. Hanno had been blessed enough to benefit from the wisdom of the Seraphim since his first breath as the White Knight, and in a way

the coin that represented it had become as much a part of him as his hands or feet. Even when he had not called on the judgement of the Seraphim, not tossed the coin, that he still held it at all had been a reassurance. A sign that he had not lost his way, that as the instrument of Judgement he still brought good into the world.

Now all that was left was a coin more silver than miracle and the growing awareness of his own imperfections.

Hanno's hand went to trace the stumps of his missing fingers. He had not grown to question the worth of that bargain, but there had been other doubts that crept to his side under cover of night. The end of the troubles at the Arsenal had been no such thing, simply a transmutation of one form of trouble into another. And though the White Knight knew better than to linger on the attribution of fault, he had wondered much over the last months of how the parts of the blame there should be assigned. Some of it was his, but how much? Hanno had refused to bend on the principles at play because those principles simply could not be bent if the Truce and Terms were to remain worth enforcing.

But he'd not conveyed this properly to the First Prince and the Black Queen, and so they had joined hands to work around him.

It had stung. Not that they'd treated him as an obstacle, for he had absolutely been one. But rather that two women he'd held in high regard had so utterly failed to understand that the Truce and Terms were already a compromise on principle and they'd been asking him to compromise those *even further*. Behind all the talk of necessities and dues, what they'd wanted of him was to go back on the rights and protections promised to someone in his charge, with little more justification for it than 'the fears of the Highest Assembly require quelling'. Which, while likely true, was not a valid reason to break half the oaths that made up the foundation of the Truce and Terms.

It was as if they'd believed he was being inflexible for the pleasure of it rather than because it was the only morally potable stance to take in that position. Even from a long-term perspective, a willingness to discard any Named that became inconvenient at the first... Hanno breathed out, reached for the calm. He would not fall into the trap of the backbiting, into the inherently losing game of beginning to think of this in terms of victory and loss. Yet he'd allowed the eminent reasonableness of the foremost villain of their age to lull him into a sense of comfort, and that was an illusion that must be discarded. While the trick with the corpse of the Red Axe had been disgraceful, it had mostly served as a reminder of a simpler truth.

Catherine Foundling did not have lines in the sand that she would not cross, if she thought it necessary. It did not erase her virtues, but neither must Hanno ever allow himself to forget that

all that stood between the Black Queen and atrocities was the perception of need.

It was Cordelia Hasenbach's complicity that had most troubled him. The White Knight was not an utter fool, he grasped that regardless of her character her position would make demands of her. Yet Cordelia Hasenbach had, once, been on the verge of being Named. The Heavens themselves had measured her being and not found it wanting. He'd honestly not believed, deep down, that she was someone who would put political needs over doing the right thing. He'd been wrong. The grim theatre of the desecration of young girl's corpse, a trial that was a farce going back on the Principate's own word – that Named alone would stand in judgement over Named – had proved otherwise.

Cordelia Hasenbach had and would place the preservation of the Principate of Procer above all other callings, no matter how wicked or virtuous they might be.

It had been a disappointment. One less person he could trust among a number already exceedingly small. And there were even fewer he could both trust and be challenged by. The Grey Pilgrim was one, but Tariq was deathly afraid of stepping back into the role he had as a younger man and that made him... hesitant to speak up, sometimes. And so few of the other heroes ever cared to question Hanno's actions, his reasons, save for those that questioned them *badly*. Or worse, for the wrong reasons as Christophe de Pavanie once had. The trust that had grown strong between the keystones of the Grand Alliance at the beginning of the war was fraying, slowly but surely. It was, Hanno had found, an unsettlingly lonely feeling.

And so now it was alone that Hanno of Arwad looked at the last of the corpses being dragged away, knowing he had tactically allowed this to happen. *Veitland*, Princess Mathilda of Neustria had succinctly asked. A cliffside village halfway through Twilight's Pass, where Iron King Konrad had once shamed fleeing armies into turning around and facing the enemy. *Hauptberg*, Klaus Papenheim had just as succinctly replied. A small dip into **Recall** had been enough to confirm what he'd already suspected, that there the bloody birth of the Iron Crown had begun in murderous treachery. Even the Barrow Sword had sniffed out the nature of what was coming, giving a warning about Captain Nabila being a skilled captain but green to the Dominion's bloody politics.

"It was lawful," Hanno murmured, eyes lingering on the streaks of red trailing the ground.

But was it just? His hand itched for the coin, but the coin was just that now. A coin. The White Knight why this had been done, and that some restraint had been shown. He agreed with the Iron Prince that if the army stayed here, it would most likely perish. The Dead King was too canny an opponent to give them the kind of

hopeless battle that they would end up winning. Which meant they must win in the mundane, in the dirt, and that meant marching west even when thousands among this army were unwilling. Leaving the mutineers behind would not have been possible, Hanno also knew. They would have been eaten up in a day and risen as soldiers in the service of Keter. These, the dark-skinned man knew, were all good reasons.

That this had been necessary was, in truth, difficult to deny. But had it been *just*?

No, his heart whispered. *It wasn't.*

There had been better ways. If he had stepped in, involved himself regardless of authorities and restraints and how it would be seen as overstepping, there might be fewer corpses in the pit. Or none at all. And the heart was just as blind as the rest of him, but these days what else did Hanno have to follow? It would have been a mistake to step in. It had been a mistake *not* to step in. If he had acted, lives could have been saved. A simple answer. If he had acted, the potential ramifications might have killed rather more than fifty people. A complicated answer. Hanno knew himself to be in the right place, for he was the White Knight and doom was creeping across the land. Between it and Calernia was where he must stand

Sometimes, though, he wondered if he was there right man to be standing there.

The thought came lightly, and left just as easily, but it was not far. The White Knight eventually forced himself to look away, for soon the fantassins would be called to heel and he intended to be there to keep an eye on matters personally. Likely, he thought, the Prince of Hannoven would try to begin an early march west so that the mutinous soldiers felt like there could be no turning back. The afternoon air was chilly and so Hanno called Light to him, letting it warm his bones as he had learned from the life of a Paladin long dead.

It came slower than it used to.

Chapter 63: Dynamism

"Not quite what I imagine my father meant, when he said I should find a talent that would set me apart from my brothers."

– Basileus Ioannes Trakas of Nicae, the Patricide

"Rocks," Masego said, wrinkling his nose. "Bogs. More rocks."

He turned to glance at me, a gesture he rarely bothered with these days.

"Why is it that you want to reconquer these lands again?"

At least the Princess of Hainaut wasn't there, as I suspected she would have been less than enchanted by Zeze's stark description of her principality. He wasn't wrong, mind you. I'd visited the great valley – in reality more like a dozen or so smaller valleys whose boundaries melded into each other's – before but it'd been closer to the capital, through the west and the heartlands. There was a reason the eastern parts of the great valley were more lightly settled than the rest: they were a damned dreary and inhospitable place. No doubt the Dead King had worsened things by killing everything that crawled or grew in the region, but somehow I doubted there'd been all that much to kill in the first place.

"Strategic reasons," I replied.

It wasn't like the fields and mines of Hainaut were going to turn the tide of the fight against Keter, even if we got both in a usable state again. Which we wouldn't, as I didn't expect there'd be any people moving back into the highlands aside from soldiers and camp followers after we took back the grounds. It was mostly the advantage of holding the shore against the dead instead of our defensive line in the lowlands that was the attraction, one made even more appealing by the Gigantes offer to set down great wards along the shoreline to keep out the undead.

"You'd think forcing people to live here would lower morale, not improve it," Masego muttered.

"Says the Wastelander," I snorted back.

The principality of Hainaut might not be a green garden of luxury, but at least it wasn't filled with murderous monsters and afflicted with weather that changed on a whim. Hierophant turned to look at me in genuine surprise, as if he could not quite believe what he'd just heard.

"The Wasteland has all the best libraries," he reminded me.

"People don't usually live in those, Zeze," I pointed out.

"I know," Hierophant sadly replied. "I asked."

It said a lot about him that I had no trouble believing that. I was just lucky Warlock must have talked him out of asking the Sahelians, back in the day. And he must have, for Masego would have asked on his own and I had absolutely no doubt that Tasia Sahelian would have given Zeze access to the infamous Wolof spell repositories for the cheap, cheap price of marrying her only

daughter. My blind friend shifted about, his shining glass eyes turning in their sockets and studying something behind him before returning.

"Company?" I asked.

"The Grey Pilgrim has it-"

There was a soft flash of Light, gone in a heartbeat, and the air filled with the scent of incinerated flesh. Ghoul, probably, if it could still smell like that. Skeletons had their own distinctive stink when burnt.

"- handled," Masego finished. "Interesting. I do believe he changes the properties he assigns Light nearly at will, Catherine. It's not unheard of, but that sheer verisimilitude certainly is."

"Having angels around for a few decades will let you pick up all sorts of tricks, I imagine," I shrugged.

The Peregrine's tread was light, but he wasn't trying to hide as he made his way up the rocky path to join us. That made it easy to pick on, for people with senses like ours.

"Light is the divine facet of faith," Tariq Fleetfoot mildly said as he came to stand by our sides. "It has few limits save those that mortal hands impose on it."

Masego look highly interested.

"So if I obtained fae hands in sufficient amounts-"

"You'd still be missing the faith," I interrupted, hoping to distract him before he gave offence.

Back when we'd been younger, tripping him over small details had usually been enough to distract him.

"It wouldn't be hard to insert into a captured fae, Catherine," Masego chided me. "It's not fundamentally different from any other kind of delusion."

I might have made a small tactical mistake there, I mentally conceded. Tariq cleared his throat, but though he did not look amused he didn't look all that angry either. Masego glanced at him through the dark eyecloth, entirely unabashed.

"Mathematically speaking, the chances of *your* particular interpretation of the Gods Above being correct of all-"

I cleared my throat. I did it twice as loud, when he kept trying to kindly explain to Tariq that basic applications of mathematics indicated that his entire life was probably a lie.

"How are the preparations going, Hierophant?" I asked.

He cocked his head to the side, burning eyes swivelling about to study the distance.

"Indrani is nearly done installing the columns," he said. "We'll be ready to proceed with the Respite ritual in about a quarter hour."

"I'll leave you to it then," I said. "I know you like to make sure the alignments are as precise as possible."

He smiled happily at me, which even now was enough to make me feel a little guilty.

"I appreciate it," Masego said, then glanced at the Pilgrim.

He nodded at the man.

"*Comparative Numerics*, by Marcellus the Elder," Hierophant suggested. "It's all quite simple, really, when you consider the-"

"I think I see 'Drani spinning a pillar about," I lightly interrupted.

Eyebrows widening in dismay, the man who even without magic to call on remained one of the finest mages in Calernia stomped away to prevent his partner from 'misaligning the constrictive forces'. His grumbling wafted up to us on the breeze even when he disappeared behind the rocks below.

"Quite a bracing young man," Tariq evenly said.

I winced.

"He means no harm," I said.

"If I believed he did, we would be having a very different conversation," the Peregrine said. "I've no qualms entertaining doubts, Catherine. Indeed, in different circumstances I suspect an evening talking with the Hierophant would make for fascinating conversation."

He'd not said 'safe' or 'religiously acceptable in any way', so I'd give him that.

"But," I said.

"But at the moment, perhaps a reminder that a certain moderation of words is in order would not go amiss," Tariq gently suggested. "Others of faith might have more of a temper, and I do believe he's been in three screaming matches with the Blessed Artificer since he arrived."

"I'll speak with him," I sighed. "But you know the Blessed Artificer situation isn't his fault alone, or entirely driven by either's character."

Their Names were clearly nudging them forward there, turning every small irritation into a slight and every disagreement into an argument. The fundamental nature of the Roles behind them were too opposed for there to be any hope of cordiality there: the Hierophant was a vivisector of all things divine, while the Blessed Artificer forged in what the Peregrine himself had called 'the divine facet of faith'.

"I am aware," Tariq said. "I have known rivals as well, Catherine, and not forgot the taste of it – and never did the enmity between my Bestowal and another's run as deep as it does between those two."

I glanced at him with interest.

"Anyone I'd have heard about?" I asked.

"They died," the Peregrine serenely said, "long before you were born."

Yeah, I just bet they did. It was good, now and then, to be reminded that the wrinkly old man in the grey robes had a body count in Named probably rivalling that of the Calamities. I'd yet to see a Revenant manage more than to mildly inconvenience the Grey Pilgrim, and it sure as Hells wasn't for lack of trying. My gaze drifted downwards, following the curve of the rocky slope. We'd left the Twilight Ways in the driest part of this little mess of bogs, as the ritual would need solid grounding, but the marshlands were spread out in every direction with only a few hills rising from them on occasion in mounds of mud and rock. The bog water was foul-smelling and filthy, but the Concocter had already confirmed it'd not been poisoned or cursed so the worse we'd had to deal with was a few bands of undead.

The entire region seemed to be crawling with them, which boded ill for the Prince of Hannover's army. A decisive victory at Juvelun wouldn't have left this many warbands out and about, so it was starting to look like Keter had bled the Iron Prince raw for that little town. Worse, it would have salvaged large enough a force that Prince Klaus would have to handle it before linking up with my incoming reinforcements. And worse than worse was that we still had little idea of where the Iron Prince's host was, what kind of a force it was facing and exactly where the missing Luciennerie army would be relative to us, Papenheim or whoever the Hells it was he was scrapping with.

Time was of the essence if I wanted to rescue an army instead of broken remnant. Fortunately, Masego was finally back on the front at my side and he'd provided a solution for our current troubles.

He called it a 'respite' ritual, though the name was catchy enough I figured he probably wasn't the one to have come up with it. It was that very ritual that we'd crossed back into Creation to enact, with as light a presence as we dared. Only Named had come, all of them save Adjutant and our two youths.

Most our finest killers were out and about, combing through the mire to make sure that nothing snuck up on us and interrupted the ritual, but we'd clearly draw some enemy attention. Undead were starting to converge, which meant we needed to hurry. Thankfully, we were nearly ready. Roland had already sent word that the secondary arrays were ready – and Masego hadn't even felt the need to check on his work afterwards, which had nearly seen me gape – and now that Indrani had finished setting up the seventh ring of pillars on our little hill there was not much left to do but the sorcery itself.

Hierophant had come loaded with artefacts that were effectively just receptacles filled with magic he could wrest for that purpose, but just in case I'd assigned the Summoner to stay at his side. We were fencing with rituals against Trismegistus himself, no matter how certain Masego was of his formulas I wanted him to have an additional source of magic at hand. I'd not phrased it to the Summoner that way of course. He was witnessing the Hierophant's work personally so he could give me his opinion on it later, though of course I'd requested that if something went amok he *lend* his magic to my court mage to solve the trouble.

It was known in the right circles I'd been Queen of Winter once upon a time, he really should have known better than not to look twice at that phrasing.

"Eastern winds, when will you blow

And return my love to me?

His lack falls like winter snow,

Cruel torment made decree."

The Rapacious Troubadour did have a lovely voice for an unrepentant monster, even when it was put to use singing horrid noble crap from back home. Archer's inexplicable fondness for the Lay of Lothian's Passing, a traditional ballad about the rise and fall of the love of Sir Lothian and his ladylove Eveline, remained a genuine puzzle to me even after years of knowing her. Mind you, it was a common enough personality defect back in Callow as well. The only reason I'd ever sat through the renditions of it at summer fairs had been that there were some pretty nifty fight scenes against Praesi – under Black, singers had prudently changed the word to 'enemy' instead – and Baroness

Fallon, the scheming noblewoman trying to trick Lothian into marriage.

"You ever notice how it's always barons and dukes that go bad in stories, but almost never counts?" I mused.

That was unfair, as in my experience most nobles were terrible regardless of their relative position of their rung in the social ladder.

"Baronial titles are at the bottom of the Callowan peerage, I believe," Tariq said, "while ducal ones are beneath only royalty. I expect both of those positions tend to... excite ambition."

Technically there were knights and lords beneath barons, but I got his point. Neither of those kinds of lesser nobles tended to ever be trouble for anyone aside from the greater nobles they were sworn to.

"I expect the Dukes of Liesse aren't going to be trouble for my successors at least," I darkly muttered. "So there's that."

Tariq, to my surprise, looked amused for a heartbeat before mastering himself.

"I know you care little for my opinion in this, and rightfully so," the Grey Pilgrim said, "but your choice of successor is to be commended, Queen Catherine. Vivienne Dartwick will make an exceptional queen."

I shot him a curious look. Tariq's reluctance to be in the vicinity of anything even remotely akin to rule meant that he usually kept his piece when it came to this sort of thing – for example, I suspected he would very much prefer Rozala Malanza reign over Procer rather than Cordelia Hasenbach – so I was surprised he'd even admit to having an opinion on the matter of Callowan succession.

"She has the right qualities," I warily agreed.

"And she will chase your shadow for the rest of her life, scouring her clean of the weaknesses that many crowned heads accrue," the Pilgrim said. "Unlike many before her, I doubt she will ever cease to strive her utmost to do good: doing so would be a betrayal of not only herself but the trust you extended her."

My lips thinned and I looked away. It wasn't that I was unaware that Vivienne and I had a complicated relationship, or that it pulled at us both in ways that were usually to our betterment – if not necessarily through healthy means. To have the darker aspects of that bond dragged out in the light of day by a man who might be an ally but was definitely not a friend was not a

pleasant experience. The Grey Pilgrim's eyes had always seen too much for comfort.

"Lothian strove and mighty slew,

A score wicked enemies

Seven lords he cut in two

And settled great enmities."

Poor dumb Lothian. When intriguing baronesses trying to get your lands offered to let you repay your family debts by valour on the battlefield, they weren't actually trying to let you off – they were just baiting you into getting in over your head so they could bail you out and leverage you with a life debt on top of the rest. I'd occasionally wondered over the years if the enduring popularity of the ballad – and play, there were like ten different versions of the story including the one in inexplicable Old Miezán – in Callow was due to the cultural resonance of a martial noble covered in glory out east getting fucked over by a more high-ranking one the moment he returned to the kingdom.

For all that we deservedly complained about the Praesi and the Procerans, my people had always been capable of being terrible to each other without anyone else's help.

"I fear I have given offence," the Grey Pilgrim finally spoke into the silence.

"No," I said. "Only discomfort. And not unearned, in the greater scheme of things."

There was a pregnant pause.

"I sometimes forget that your Woe love each other," Tariq admitted. "It is unusual, in a band of villains. Yet these are changing times. I meant my words as a compliment, however short of that they might have fallen. You found a protector for your home, and set her on a path that promises distinction."

"Then I will endeavour to remember your words as they were meant," I said.

There, and to think some people said I wasn't diplomatic. The old man ruefully smiled.

"It is a bad habit," the Pilgrim admitted.

Thinking the worse of us? It was, and often tiring to deal with, but he was hardly the worst of his kind when it came to that particular sin. That he faced and fought it already made him among the finest of their number when it came to address it, so I would not whine. Besides, I held no illusions about the truth of

villainy on Calernia. Though in time it might be sanitized, turned into something worth embracing, at the moment it was the side that counted cannibals and rapists among its ranks. I would not moan about the distrust of villains when I hardly trusted any of them myself. As a woman of refined tastes, I preferred my hypocrisies to be at least somewhat deniable.

"There are worse to have," I said. "I've dabbled in a few myself, Peregrine."

"The mistaken comparisons to others I have known is certainly one such habit," the old man said, "but as it happens I meant another. I was leading up to making a request, you see. Yet, as young Indrani once made clear to me, it is not for me to pull and prod at you: straightforward honesty will always fetch better result."

Huh, I thought, glancing from the corner of my eye. When exactly was it that those two had had that purported conversation? I didn't mind, but Archer had never mentioned it to me.

"I like to think so," I finally said, a little taken aback. "I'm listening, Pilgrim, though I make no promises."

As far as I was concerned, Razin and Aquiline were once more his problem. I'd only agreed to keep an eye on them as a temporary favour, not to forever be their guardian devil. They were way too much of a headache for me to be inclined to renew that promise anyway.

"I would request that you keep your distance from the White Knight, when our armies are joined," Tariq said.

I frowned. This again? I'd thought that the old snickering rumours about Hanno and I being more than simply friendly were dead and buried. Hells, we weren't even friendly anymore.

"I've told you before that--"

"And I believe you," the Grey Pilgrim calmly interrupted. "This is unrelated, Catherine. Before I left the army, I glimpsed in the Sword of Judgement the beginnings of a crisis of faith."

I fixed the old man with a steady look.

"This not the time for the White Knight to stumble," I bluntly said.

Even when he disagreed with me, even when we did not get along, his participation to the Truce and Terms alone leant it an amount of legitimacy that we badly needed. I wasn't going to pretend that one of the first things we hammered into heroes hesitating to sign up was 'the Sword of Judgement is part of this'.

"On that we must disagree," the Pilgrim frankly said. "This is *precisely* the right time for the White Knight to stumble."

I blinked. Right, fucking hero logic. It had all the hallmarks of madness, except for the part where it worked.

"You're going to have to walk me through that one," I admitted. "In my experience, when one of yours doubts they either die or lose their Name."

"We are all tested, sooner or later," Tariq said. "Often this begins with a loss of potency, brought about by doubt or fear, but should we rise to meet that test we do not simply resume what we were: we rise *above* it."

My eyes narrowed. That came uncomfortably close to 'iron sharpens iron' in some ways, which made it all the more distressing coming from the eldest living hero on Calernia. Mind you the test as he described it wouldn't necessarily be another person, which in the central philosophy of the Praesi highborn it always was. To the old guard of the Wasteland, even fighting off an invasion was just a setting for another duel against your rivals.

"I'm not too clear on what it is that Hanno has to doubt," I frankly said. "He's been mostly getting his way, except when it'd cost too much to others if he did. He's an intelligent man and reasonable enough for one of your lot, so he shouldn't be expecting much more of us wicked sinners."

"His thoughts are his own, and not mine to divulge," the Pilgrim said, "yet I will speak to my own. Hanno of Arwad is split between the man he wants to be and the man fate demands he should be."

That did not sound like a particularly pleasant place to be in. I stayed silent, waiting for Tariq to elaborate, and he did not disappoint.

"He is the Sword of Judgement by choice," the Grey Pilgrim said, "but he is the White Knight through the workings of fate."

"There's not supposed to be a difference between the two," I pointed out.

"Yet there is," the old man said. "The Sword of Judgement is growing increasingly unable to stomach the deals the White Knight has been forced to make to ensure that we survive this war. And soon that disparity will come to a head."

I studied him for a bit, parsing his words. By 'Sword of Judgement' I figured he was actually referring to Hanno's comfortable embrace of his role as the designated hatchetman of the Seraphim. It did tend to be what he defaulted to being when

in conflict, I'd noticed, even now that Judgement had grown quiet. What was meant by 'White Knight', though, was a little more nebulous to my eye.

"Hanno the man who believes in Judgement," I tried, "and Hanno the man who is an officer of the Grand Alliance."

The Pilgrim gently smiled at me.

"The latter is a mortal tie, Catherine," he said. "It would not bind him. It is, rather, Hanno the man who has sworn his faith to the Seraphim and Hanno the man who leads the heroes of our age."

"I will not mistrust, said she,

And never shall I despair

Tenderness will set me free,

To lovers the world is fair."

I mulled that over a while. Tariq was, in essence, telling me that the while Hanno might have been a good fit for the Name of White Knight in certain circumstances they were not the current ones. *He fits the Name but not the Role*, I tried out. *At least not the Role the war has forced on him*. He commanded obedience, through charisma and respect, but I could see how an argument could be made that Hanno didn't particularly want to be in charge of heroes, or really of anything at all. He tended to see leadership as a burden, and only took it up when he perceived it at as his duty to do so. Which, given that this war was vaguely crusade-shaped and he was the White Knight, must have been a lot more often than he was comfortable with.

Throw in the Hierarch silencing the entire Choir of Judgement for what was, as far as I knew, the first time in recorded Calernian history? I could see why Hanno was having some troubles coming to terms with who he was turning into. Which tended to be a costly kind of doubt, for Named.

Our time at the Arsenal looks different seen through those eyes, I thought. What I'd seen as inflexibility and even obstructionism on his part took instead the shape of the White Knight considering the troubles in the Highest Assembly as a Cordelia's sphere of trouble to deal with and not for him to meddle in, much like the Red Axe had been his sphere of responsibility where we should not have trespassed. That seemed overly simplistic to me, but then I was in a pretty unique situation wasn't I? I'd accumulated influence until I'd come to sit on every council as both Queen of Callow and representative for the villains. I'd not really seen a difference because to me there really wasn't.

Frankly, I still thought he was wrong. The moment the Red Axe had tried to kill a Proceran prince of the blood it had become problem that involved more than just heroes whether he liked it or not. But seen from that perspective, both Cordelia and I would have overreached and meddled in his sphere when he'd been scrupulously careful about never touching ours. *And I just bet if things had gotten bad after we obeyed those invisible lines and Hasenbach had said she needed his help, he would have given it without hesitation*, I ruefully thought. Because he would have been invited to step beyond his sphere, while on the other hand the First Prince and I had simply worked around him to get what we needed.

It was that fucking hero mindset, I silently cursed. He didn't see something like the rebellious whispers in the Assembly as a real problem, because in his experience if he kept doing the right thing and trouble came then continuing to do the right thing would get him through that as well. Why compromise and dirty his principles, when the moment it all went to shit he could instead make an inspiring speech to the rebels and Creation would bend over backwards for it to work? There were godsdamned good reasons I was still trying to keep Named from being able to be rulers, even if my failure there was all but writ in the stars. There'd been blind spots all around, I finally admitted to myself, and they'd neatly fit into our worst expectations of each other.

Merciless Gods but that felt like something the Intercessor would have arranged. Surely even she couldn't manipulate us this precisely, though. Right? I clenched my fingers and unclenched them. It was always the necessary degree of paranoia that was difficult to gauge with the Wandering Bard, not whether or not it was necessary at all.

"All right," I said. "Say I buy that. What does it get the Heavens for their favourite knight to doubt his place in Creation?"

"Times are changing," Tariq softly said. "And while I have grown distressed by the echo of truth there has been to the words of your once-teacher, I will not shy away from the truth: though it can be said that Good triumphed in the Age of Wonders, in this dawning Age of Order is it Evil that has seized the lead."

"It doesn't have to be a competition," I began, then bit my tongue.

I sighed.

"It does," I admitted. "It does have to be competition, that's how we were made. But it doesn't have to be the kind of wars it's turned into, Tariq. The ones that shatter cities and break nations. It can be made, if not civil, then at least civilized."

"I do not know if I believe that," the Grey Pilgrim quietly replied.

I winced at the blunt admission.

"But I recognize that *you* believe it," Tariq Fleetfoot continued. "And in that I can put my trust. The truth is, Catherine, that I am an old man. Set in my ways. And I will try to change them to better ones, so long as there is breath yet left in this carcass, but I have fought Evil for many years and it has taken its toll. I am not certain there would be a place for someone like me, in the world you seek to make."

The Grey Pilgrim mirthlessly smiled.

"That is, in a sense, the highest compliment I can pay your dream," the Peregrine said. "But I will not be alone in this, Black Queen. I *am* not alone in this. Consider Hanno of Arwad, the man as you know him, and tell me that if he had been born two centuries past he would have been the kind of hero we would still raise shrines to."

"He would have made mincemeat of most Old Tyrants," I agreed. "Your point?"

"That there are no longer Old Tyrants to fight," the Grey Pilgrim honestly replied. "And so we must change with the times, or become relics. His struggle is not his alone, Catherine. We must, all of us, reconcile the wild heroics of my youth to what would be allowed in the world to come – as young Hanno must now reconcile the unalloyed purpose the Seraphim taught him and the demands made of a White Knight in a greying world."

"You think he's going to set the path," I slowly said. "Carve the groove others will flow into."

"I do," Tariq said. "And so I ask you to leave him to his test, that he might find an answer that is his and his alone."

Which meant, beyond the all the flowery talk, that he didn't want me getting my hands anywhere near Hanno while he transitioned into... whatever it was that lay ahead. I doubted it'd be a new Name, but perhaps a second flowering of his current one was not out of the question. I forced myself to step out of my own perspective and consider what was being asked of me. Meddling in Hanno's 'test', if he was really undergoing such a thing, could potentially yield advantages for me. It seemed possible to at least nudge him in a direction that wasn't adversarial to my own. On the other hand, wasn't that very kind of meddling something providence was bound to punish me over? Villains that thought they were the cleverest thing since Traitorous tended to end up in some pit or another, one that they'd even dug themselves most of the time.

It'd be damned easy to misstep and become the proverbial devil on Hanno's shoulder, or worse the enemy he defined himself through. It might come to that anyway, I honestly admitted to myself. We were both prominent Named as well as representatives of a larger amount of Named. Yet so long as the enmity was one of means and ideals rather than, you know, demons and calling down Choirs I could deal with it. And I was honestly inclined to believe that the less I was involved the friendlier the end result would be: I doubted the Heavens would take kindly to my meddling with the tempering of their designated champion. If he was truly that, I reminded myself. I would not take the Grey Pilgrim's opinions as facts, no matter how wizened and wise the old man was.

"Our duties will still see us working together," I eventually said.

It was tacitly accepting his request, and neither of us pretended otherwise. Aside from all other considerations, antagonizing the Peregrine over something he believed to be this important would have been a blunder.

"Adjacency," the Grey Pilgrim replied, "is not intrusion."

Fair enough. So long as I didn't actively meddle, he wouldn't consider it meddling. Pretty fair terms, though admittedly these days Tariq wasn't in a position to ask much of me that I didn't want to give.

"I'll look forward to the ending, then," I said.

"So will I," the Peregrine smiled. "I expect that light will burn bright, Black Queen, and come just when the night has grown darkest."

That old trick again, huh? Kairos had liked to always have a fresh enemy to make, but Tariq had a favoured trick of his own: to keep a journey ongoing and undefined, so that providence might lead it to end at precisely the right time. It'd bit him in the ass at the Graveyard, but the old man was pretty much the patron saint of timely arrivals so I could see how leaning into that groove would have paid off for him over the years. That Hanno's journey here would be a metaphorical one wouldn't matter, as far as the Pilgrim was concerned.

Fate, to his kind, was a book writ from ending to start.

It was not an answer I shared. *Fate is a tug of war*, I'd once heard a madman say, and for all that madness he had not been wrong. By our own hands we would make or break this world, and if either gods or Gods disagreed then let them bite their tongue bloody.

"Let me die then, Lothian said

I choose doom, end in honour

Many seasons my heart bled

As my oath kept me from her."

The song, beautifully played as it had been, ended abruptly after the last note preceding Sir Lothian's getting himself killed in battle before he was forced to marry Baroness Fallon. The Rapacious Troubadour, like us, had felt the power gathering. Below us sorcery flared as at last began the ritual we'd been awaiting. Our respite. Chords of magic, thick and burning, began to flow along the trajectory the columns had set as the smell of ozone filled the air and a dim pressure began to mount. The dead god on his throne in Keter had blinded us, here in Hainaut, but his hollow miracles were not beyond us.

Hierophant laughed, exulting as the ritual took, and ripped open an eye in the sky.

Chapter 64: Candidate Moves

"To rule is to drag a lion by the whisker."

– Helikean saying

Truth was, even now Masego hadn't found a way to genuinely break the rituals that the Dead King used to prevent scrying in the territories he held. For two years the Arsenal had tried, after we made it clear to some of the finest magical minds of Calernia that regaining that capacity would be militarily invaluable, but no working counter-ritual had come of it. We had brought together exceptional people, but our enemy was more than just that: he was the Hidden Horror, the exception itself. So Hierophant, for all that he'd suffered a god riding his mind for most of a year and studied the wards at Lyonceau – where the Tyrant had borrowed from the Dead King's work, among other things – had not been able to overturn the weight of the millennia's bearing down on us. Zeze was brilliant, but there were some things beyond brilliance.

So Hierophant had stolen a mystery from an entity that *could* win.

The clouds in the sky spun like a whirlpool, swallowed by the great eye that our ritual had opened high above. Even for me, the empty howling void was an unsettling sight. Sorcery burned loud and bright, the stone pillars we'd driven into the ground buzzing like hornets as they fought the enchantments that blanketed most of Hainaut and suppressed scrying. Hurrying, I limped my way down the rocky slope towards a box of burnished bronze and electrum that stood taller than me. Nestled against the hill, anchored with enchantments so it would not move so much as a hair's

breadth, the arcane patterns of electrum on the sides were now glimmering with eerie light. The bronze was warm enough that I could feel the heat just from passing my hand close, and it would only get warmer.

The front of the box was the most complex part of it: a harsh, labyrinthine electrum pattern that usually closed together like a puzzle box but had now been carefully pried open. Slender gaps had been bared in the pattern by the manipulations, their rims covered with small bronze-inscribed runes, and through them I glimpsed that within the box there was a cube of pure white marble. Without my noticing it Roland had returned from his work on the hill to our east, and now stood by Masego's side close to the box. The sight was almost amusing, Hierophant being at least a head taller for all that the Rogue Sorcerer's longcoat and layers made him seem larger, but the intent focus both displayed had me reluctant to disturb them with even a snort.

"Roland?" Masego asked, burning eyes on the box.

"Almost there," the Rogue Sorcerer replied, his own gaze on a slender baton of obsidian in his hands where I glimpsed a few burning marks. "Five, four, three, two—"

As soon as the Proceran mage got to three Hierophant raised his arm, wresting sorcery from a small cube he held in his fist, and a circle of golden runes flared around his fingers.

"Discharge," Masego warned.

Sorcery pulled towards us for half a heartbeat, as if the currents had reversed, and the flow was sucked into the box where I saw terrible fires bloom before the moment passed and the eye in the sky screamed anew. To the west of us, a hill blew up in a thundering rain of rock and mud.

"Our bleed margin is much too high," Roland said. "We won't make it to four instances."

"Three will be enough," Hierophant replied, leaning over the box.

With his bare hands — he'd known fires hotter than this, and even now their reflection burned in his eyes — he began to manipulate the top of the box, extracting what looked like a large gear before turning it briskly. Within the box, the marble cube turned to match and presented a fresh and unmarred face to the open gaps. The gear was pushed back down after adjustment, and within twenty heartbeats another discharge followed. The hill to the east of us blew up, but I had closer perils to worry about: the stone pillars anchored on this hill were vibrating so quickly and intensely it seemed only a matter of time before they shattered.

"Masego," I asked, shouting over the din. "How safe are we on the hill?"

He turned towards me, offering a boyish grin.

"Not at all!" he shouted back, and raised his arm.

A fresh cube held in his fist, golden runes formed in a circle as Roland protested with a shout that the build-up was not yet done.

"*Discharge*," Hierophant cackled.

Cackling wasn't usually a good sign, in my experience, so I wrapped myself up in Night the moment before the sorcery could be pulled in. The magic blew in, pillars popping as it passed them – ah, they'd somehow been built so the shards would go up instead of all around – and hammered into the cage. Some bits of stone fell on my Night-cloak, but nothing I couldn't handle so I risked a glance at Roland. Whose obsidian baton was cracking, the burning runes on it going wild.

"*Oh merde*," I heard him curse, throwing away the baton.

It blew up in a great gout of flame maybe three feet above his head, liquid drops of obsidian hissing against mud and stone as they were sprinkled everywhere. Masego, though, ignored it all. He was trying to vent the contents of the box, where the fires had somehow gotten caught. He opened fresh gaps on two sides before the glimmer of the electrum patterns turned into a glare. The tall mage finally stepped back.

"It's done?" I called out.

"In a manner of speaking," Zeze calmly noted, continuing to move away. "I would recommend taking cover, Catherine."

"You little-" I began, throwing myself behind a jutting stone just in time for a great crunching sound to resound.

Oh dear. That had sounded like the box crumpling inwards. Then there were a pulse of flame and metal shrapnel as the box blew up while I hid under my cloak. I waited ten full heartbeats before popping out for a look, and I saw with a dry swallow that the explosion had outright melted the top of the hill. The Grey Pilgrim had gotten off first, right? That was, uh, going to be tricky to explain to the Dominion otherwise.

"Anybody dead?" Roland called out, popping out from behind his own rock.

"A pointless question. It would require necromancy before-" Masego replied.

"I think everyone's fine," I interrupted before he could really get started. "Did it work?"

"Of course it worked," Hierophant said, sounding offended. "Who do you take me for?"

"Ask me that question again when I don't have melted rock all over my nice cloak," I grunted. "You're not fishing for a nice answer otherwise."

I broke cover, brushing myself off, and the three of us came to look at the results. The marble cube was seared on three sides, but it'd not just been fire thrown at rock. It'd been a sculpture, in a sense: the central valley of Hainaut and some of the outskirts, as seen from the sky. Each of the three facets had captured that sight for the blink of that great eye above and seen it seared onto the marble. There were imprecisions, of course. The Dead King's rituals had muddled it up some. But that was the entire point of having several discharges, as there'd be very few places on our 'map' where the imprecisions had taken all three times.

"So this is what the world looks like through a Choir's eyes," I said.

"Not exactly," Roland told me. "Think of angels as seeing the world through a lens. What you can witness seared here is what we mortals would see when looking through that same lens."

"Humans don't have the parts necessary to observe Creation as a Choir would," Masego absent-mindedly noted. "Even soul scaffolding wouldn't be sufficient, it would require complete essence reconstruction. As Duchess of Moonless Nights we would have been able to replace the marble with your mind and allow you to look directly, as the damage would have repaired itself, but as you currently are you would not survive the experience."

I still remembered how much of a pain just stealing Ashkaran from echoes in Arcadia had been, so I suspected that he was downplaying the difficulties involved when he simply called it 'damage'.

"Good to know," I muttered. "I believe we can work with this, Masego. We'll need magnifying glass for some of the details, but I can already make out the bare bones."

Such as they were, which was pretty worrying. I limped back and forth between the facets, narrowing my eyes at what I saw. If I correctly understood where we were, then at the moment we were... north-west of what had to be the Iron Prince's army. Unfortunately, that put us in the wrong place. Ahead of the Prince Klaus' column was a large force of undead, but not so large he shouldn't be able to defeat it on the field. Behind it,

though, was what had to be the missing Luciennerie army. By the looks of it it'd divided into three smaller forces: one was headed south towards the Cigelin Sisters, but the other two columns were marching straight towards where the Iron Prince was going to have to give battle.

That put them square to the south of us, and went some way in explaining why this part of Hainaut was swarming with warbands. Worse, it looked like my allies had left part of their forces behind: to the west of Juvelun there was something that looked like a camp. Hard to tell numbers without using something to magnify the details, though, which could wait until we'd gotten back to camp. I straightened, casting one last lingering look at the marble. For all that what I'd learned had not exactly good news, that I knew it at all was a great coup. If we'd gone about this blindly, the damage could have been... significant.

"Good work," I said. "Both you."

"It was," Masego replied, clearly pleased I agreed with his own assessment.

"The Pilgrim and the Artificer will handle wiping all trace of what we did here with Light," I said. "As for us, though, we're done here. Let's load up our rock on a cart and head back."

"I'll be glad to," Roland admitted, casting a wary look at the mire. "I suspect we're about to have a great deal more company."

"Ain't that always the way, with us?" I snorted. "It's all about staying that one step ahead, Roland."

Well, that or you died.

—

Adjutant had transcribed seared stone into what looked like a halfway decent overview of central Hainaut in less than an hour with only one hand to use. A useful reminder that, even when crippled in a wheelchair Hakram could do the work of several people in a fraction of the time it would have taken them with objectively superior results. Masego was making noises that the prosthetics would soon be sufficiently attuned to the orc's body for surgery, so he might even be out of that chair soon – though he'd have to learn to walk all over again, and likely keep using crutches for months. I'd used the span of time where he worked to have a wash in the river we'd camped near in the Twilight Ways, so it was feeling quite refreshed that I returned to my tent.

Our venture of the morning had been rather productive, but now that we had the bird's eye view of this campaign it was time to decide exactly how we were going to fight it. My initial notion had been to lay an ambush for the Luciennerie army, but I wasn't

sure how viable that would really be at the moment. I had a bottle of wine opened and sent for what was definitely not a war council: Indrani, Masego and Akua. Hakram was already at my side so there was hardly a need for an engraved invitation there. I rather wished Vivienne could have been there, as it'd been too long since all of the Woe had gathered, but she had duties of her own.

Besides, without wanting to sound grim would have been gambling on my part to have my successor and I in the same theatre of war.

"You know, when I blow up mud hills I don't get commended," Indrani complained the moment she drifted in. "It's all 'that was valuable ammunition, Archer', or 'stop using our trebuchets outside battles'."

"Your point?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow.

She slid into a seat on the other side of the table, Akua and Masego following her into the tent with long strides, speaking in Mthethwa – something about 'complexity returns', whatever those were – and settling further down, Zeze taking the place at Indrani's side as if it were his natural one. I hid a smile.

"It's favoritism, is my point," Indrani said, jabbing an accusing finger at me.

"You're right," I admitted.

The surprise on her face was quite delightful.

"I *do* like him better than you," I breezily added.

She gasped in half-genuine offence.

"Hakram, jot that down," I mused. "We can look into having it made a royal decree."

I didn't go quite as far as jokingly offer Masego to blow up any hill he liked, because I was worried he might actually take me up on that offer. And, like, I *did* have a lot of hills in my demesne in Marchford but they weren't exactly a renewable resource so while I wasn't outright saying 'never blow up my hills' I'd at least want a *reason* first. I felt like that was a justifiable stance to take, all things considered.

"I'll see about having the list ranking us in the order you like most made official," Hakram idly said.

There was a heartbeat of silence.

"She doesn't have that," Indrani said, narrowing her eyes at me.

"Of course I don't, number si- I mean, Indrani," I replied with a smile.

I winked, botching it just because I knew it being half-assed would piss her off even more.

"Come on," Archer complained. "There's no way I'm last."

"That you think that is why you are, my dear," Akua gently smiled.

I did admire how genuinely benign she could look while purposefully turning the knife in the wound, it was pretty impressive,

"That sounds very useful," Masego said, sounding approving.

"Could I have a transcript, along with the criteria for ranking?"

"I'll think about," I lied.

Adjutant cleared his throat, a call to order before this ended up into a pleasant waste of several hours. Archer avenged herself on me by pouring herself a cup of wine and filling it up to the rim, like a savage, while Akua considered me with golden eyes. A dress in red and white today, which while unable to decide whether it was a ballroom gown or a tabard remained quite flattering no matter the attached interpretation.

"I heard through the grapevine that your adventure back on Creation was a success," Akua said.

"Heh," Archer snickered, elbowing Zeze. "She called you a plant."

"It was a metaphor," he revealed to her. "... I think. I don't believe even Wolof ever got the spell to work for a living person."

"They haven't," Akua assured him. "Corpses only. Am I to take it, then, that this is to be a council of strategy?"

It was a rhetorical question, we both knew, but one that'd push us into the meat of this meeting. She did like to provide these helpful light touches, though when Hakram was there she was much more careful about their use – I got the feeling she was being exceedingly careful about never stepping on his toes. Likely she figured that trying to step into the position of my right hand was a fool's errand, which to be frank it was. Akua was a lot of things, many of which were technically curses, but socially blind wasn't one of them.

"We have a bit of trouble," I said. "The Iron Prince is a long way from shore, and the tide's getting rowdy."

"Have even ever been on a boat?" Indrani skeptically asked.

"A fishing boat, yes," I smugly replied.

Only when it'd been docked and to get handsy with a boy, but she didn't need to know that.

"By custom she's also high admiral of Callow unless the title is otherwise assigned," Hakram noted. "Which makes her the finest sailor of all assembled here by far."

"I've helmed sailing ships on the Wasaliti at least twice a summer ever since I was-" Akua began, tone irritated, then her face blanked and cleared her throat. "Yet I believe there will be no ships involved here beyond the metaphorical, so-"

I met Indrani's eyes across the table, sharing triumphant grins. It was always a rare treat to bait out of her a genuine reaction. Back when we'd started she'd often fake those to fit in better, but these days when she tried we could usually tell.

"Why are we here, then?" Masego asked me, cutting through Akua's verbal retreat. "Most of us don't have military training, or at least not military officer training. Would you not be served better by a war council of your highest commanders?"

"I already know what needs to be done," I honestly said. "Might have to move the numbers around a bit, but there's not a lot of room for manoeuver when it comes down to it."

I leaned forward over the 'map' Hakram had put together from the seared stone, tapping a finger on the representation of Klaus Papenheim's army. The part of it on the march, at least.

"We need to reinforce those as they give battle to the undead ahead of them," I said.

"No need to explain this for my benefit," Masego frankly said. "I will only pretend to listen to regardless."

Well, at least he was being honest about it.

"I want to know," Indrani piously said. "Because I care about you, and I'm a good friend."

"A valiant effort, number six," Akua murmured. "If stunningly transparent."

"That's rich coming from you, Shifty Spectre," Archer muttered back. "I bet if I shone Light at you it'd go straight through."

"Since Indrani requests it, a quick summary," I said.

I glanced at Hakram, who kicked Zeze under the table. Good man.

"This," I said, as I put down my finger on the Iron Prince's army, "is the other Grand Alliance army in Hainaut. We want to save it, because if we don't we're fucked for the year – if not for much longer than that."

I moved my finger slightly west on the map, maybe a day's march away from Klaus' army.

"This is an undead force, which has to be at least twenty thousand and probably more," I said. "The Iron Prince is marching on it, and will probably beat it in an open battle, but it represents a trap."

I moved even further west, still at the same height. There three forces could be made out, but I ignored the one headed south towards the Cigelin Sisters. That one was General Abigail's problem, or if she got lucky her prey: should the Sisters fall before those reinforcements arrive, Abigail of Summerholm would be in a very good position to simply smash that army when it arrived before her. It was always pleasant to be reminded that, for all his advantages over us, the Dead King had limits to his sight as well.

"This is an army that used to be far to the west, in Luciennerie, but marched east to surprise us here in the valley," I said. "It's large, at least a hundred thousand, and odds are it's going to hit the Iron Prince's army just the day after it fought a battle against the undead force I mentioned previously. That would be *bad*."

Not only had the Prince of Hannover left part of his army behind, which meant he'd be understrength – I was guessing casualties had been rough taking Juvelun so he'd been forced to leave behind troops to protect a large amount of wounded – but the dead would strike after our very mortal enemy had finished fighting another battle, with all the casualties and exhaustion that involved. No, if the Luciennerie columns actually reached Prince Klaus' army then it would be a disaster.

"We are here, more or less," I finished, pointing to a spot on the map.

Northwest of the Iron Prince and the undead he would soon fight, north of the Luciennerie columns. I'd hoped the Twilight Ways would allow us to steal the march on those, but the Dead King hadn't kept a sedate pace. Splitting into several columns would weaken him against an ambush, but it had also allowed the large army to march quicker. When you had the kind of numbers Keter could boast of, often timing was more important than formations.

"That does not seem like the right place to be," Masego assessed. "We should perhaps move towards the Iron Prince, who we are meant to save."

A conclusion I'd not dragged him towards, though I had perhaps gently taken him by the hand and walked him there.

"Which we'll do," I said. "But it can't be only that. If we just reinforce Prince Klaus with all we have, the advancing columns will hit us not long afterwards. That's not a battle I want to give, not right now."

If we got there in time to reinforce our allies, which it was a coin toss we would, then we'd have numbers on our side for the first battle. We'd still take losses, though, and tire our men. Then for the battle that followed we *wouldn't* have the numbers, and we'd have all the damage done by our first fight weighing us down. I honestly believed we'd be able to win that battle too, but the costs would be hard to bear. We'd want to have that fight when we were prepared and well-rested, not buried in blood and dust. As it happened I knew exactly where I wanted to fight that decisive battle: the city of Hainaut, the very capital of the principality.

Which meant I had to prevent the Luciennerie columns from reaching that battlefield, and there honestly weren't twenty ways to do that.

"Which is why-"

"I see," Masego sagely nodded.

I paused. Was he just going to say that at regular intervals in the hope I'd figure that meant he was listening? I glanced at Archer, who offered me winsome smile. Ugh. She hadn't been listening either, had she? Gods, those two had gotten even worse now that they were together. It was like they'd crossbred their character flaws into one single great malevolent chimera.

"Hakram," I sighed.

Masego yelped as he was kicked under the table, and though Indrani smiled mockingly and tried to move back her chair she found that shadows had mysteriously kept it stuck where it was. She glared at Akua.

"Praesi treache- ow, Hakram that was my knee you prick!"

"I've no idea what you could possibly mean, darling," Akua smiled, sipping at a wine glass she'd never poured.

"Which is why we will be fighting a holding action against the enemy columns," I said, "while the majority of our army reinforces Prince Klaus. At the moment, I'm inclined to field only the Order and the Second Army. We'll take a few Named as well, but once more the majority will be headed towards the Iron Prince."

"Ah," Masego frowned, "I must have missed something. Or is the plan truly to fight the largest enemy army with the small force you mentioned, while the rest all gathers to fight together a smaller army that the Prince of Hannover could likely beat alone?"

"No," I mused, "that's a fairly apt summation actually."

He frowned further.

"How many bottles have you *had*?" Zeze severely asked.

Indrani cackled in laughter, while even Hakram cracked a smile. Only loyal – treacherous – reliable – well, relatively speaking – Akua did not descend into opportunistic mockery.

"We slow the enemy by a day, perhaps two, and then retreat as the Prince of Hannover will during the time we bought him," she noted. "It seems achievable. Where is it that you intend to make our stand afterwards, Catherine?"

I tapped a finger on the capital, meeting her eyes.

"Bold," Akua noted.

"Symbolic," I said. "And, aside from that kind of consideration, it's finest set of fortifications in the valley. Our best bet by far."

Abigail would have the Cigelin Sisters secured by then, taking the pressure off of our defensive line, and from behind city walls we'd be able to supply ourselves through the Twilight Ways. If not necessarily for long, given the difficulties of feeding so many people by convoys. Neshamah was after our extermination, so he'd come for us in Hainaut sure as dawn – he might not ever again get this good an opportunity to wipe out our full forces in this front. The great army that'd chased after Prince Klaus from Malmedit would be drawn into this as well, and at the capital of the fallen principality we would roll the dice on the outcome of this campaign.

"It's a delaying action we'll be fighting, Zeze," I added for his sake. "The objective here isn't to win the battle, it's to slow down the enemy while losing as few people as possible and making it away safely."

"I see," Masego said, and I narrowed my eyes.

It seemed like he meant it this time, though, so I let it go.

"I am still unsure why you gathered us here," he then admitted.

“‘cause we’re all going to be with her in that scrap,” Indrani casually said. “So she wants to hear us first. What we need, which Named we want to keep. That about right?”

“It is,” I said. “I’ve an idea or two to slow down the enemy while avoiding a bloody fight, but I’ll be relying on all of you. I’ll likely be on the field, which means Hakram will be holding command over our Named in my absence while General Hune and Grandmaster Talbot will handle the manoeuvring.”

“How many Named do we get to keep?” Indrani asked.

“Four, five tops,” I said. “Aside from the people here, of course.”

“Then we should bring the Blessed Artificer,” Archer bluntly said. “I know she’s not exactly the favourite of anyone at this table, but-”

“Large-scale workings, even in something as limited as Light, will be of great use,” Masego calmly interrupted. “I agree. I would request the Summoner, myself. His branch of sorcery is highly flexible, and unlike Roland there would be no complications in wresting his magic for use of my own should there be need.”

Why was it that the most useful Named so often ended up being the most unpleasant ones? Still, just because I personally disliked both people mentioned did not mean they’d not been brought up for good reasons. The Summoner, in particular, was someone I’d been inclined to bring in. While tiresome he wasn’t too difficult to handle, he really was just that damned useful to have around.

“Who will be leading the Named reinforcing Prince Klaus?” Akua asked.

“Unless one of you requests him, it will be Roland,” I said.

The shade cocked her head to the side.

“Not the Grey Pilgrim,” she observed.

“I have a use for him, as it happens,” I smiled. “Unless one of you objects?”

None did. I doubted Tariq would be hard to talk into it, if he needed to be convinced at all. This sort of stand was right up his alley, and while the Forsworn Healer brought similar strength in healing – superior when it came to groups actually – to the table, there were few Named who could boast of sharper bite than the Peregrine. That made three down, so we still had room for some. I glanced at Hakram.

"I would keep the Apprentice," Adjutant gravelled. "She has been of use, and I have a particular idea in mind."

That had a promising ring to it. Both this talk of idea and Hakram no longer talking of having the young girl along through his teeth.

"Do you now?" I muttered. "Done, then. I'll look forward to it."

My eyes moved to Akua, who had laid her chin on her palm and seemed deep in thought. She worked differently than I did, I'd noticed, when it came to laying schemes. I preferred to have someone to speak with, as I'd found that the back-and-forth and other set of eyes usually helped me find angles, but silence was her own way. I sometimes wondered how much of that had been that, as a girl, there simply would have been no one she could afford to trust with her thoughts.

"I take it you do not have a precise role in mind for me already?" Akua asked.

"No," I said. "I expect I'll be moving between places putting out fires, and I had a thought you might be the solution to my inability to be in two places at once, but that's not set in stone. If you have a proposal, I'm all ears."

"Very forward," Indrani said, not disapprovingly.

I ignored her.

"I have a notion, perhaps," the shade mused. "It have been considering the nature of our enemy, and how best it might be struck at."

"So you have someone in mind," I said.

"I do," Akua Sahelian smiled. "I've a use for the Rapacious Troubadour, my heart."

I blinked. That, uh, had not been the name – Name – I was expecting. But that actually made it easier to claim five Named, since neither the Apprentice nor the Troubadour were considered major battlefield assets. *Mind you, if the Doom of Liesse has a use for a singer I doubt it'll be because she has a hankering for a tune*, I thought.

"You have him, then," I said. "Which makes five."

We had our roster, our plan and our enemy. There'd be a war council later to hammer all the details together, but as far as I was concerned the essentials were settled.

And just like that, to war we went.

Chapter 65: Cross-Check

"Victory lies in understanding the intentions of the enemy. Therefore, a general with no intentions cannot be beaten."

– Isabella the Mad, Proceran general

"So what is this place called again?"

"Maillac, my queen."

I idly glanced at the man who'd replied to my question. Sir Brandon Talbot, Grandmaster of the Order of Broken Bells, had not been much changed by the war. I was often surprised by that. His once-long hair had been cut short but the beard and the strong build remained just the same as when I'd first met him, sitting in a cell where Juniper had tossed him. Many of the great officers of the Army of Callow and other hosts strained under their burden of their position, but on the contrary Brandon Talbot had taken rather well to this war. It helped, I suspected, than this was all simpler the kinds of war he'd known before – be it the Folly, where he had fought to maintain Praesi rule under my banner, or the Tenth Crusade when he'd followed a homegrown villain against invading heroes.

There was no one alive who could bring horrors to bear that would rival the Dead King's, but for all the madness this was the kind of war that my people were most comfortable waging: black and white, no truce with the Enemy. I sometimes envied that he was not in a position to truly grasp the kind of ugly dealings necessary to keep something like the Grand Alliance afloat. A great good too often came at the costs of a hundred petty evils, like a saint standing on a pedestals devils had paid for.

"Gods, and to think someone believed it a sound notion to build a village here," I said. "They must have been drunk."

The dark-haired nobleman – one of the few of the breed I caught myself occasionally liking – let out a small amused noise.

"Some of the land north of Harrow is not so dissimilar, I am told," Brandon Talbot said. "I was taught as a boy that the people there are usually poor but skilled hunters and fishermen. As bowmen they have a high reputation in certain parts, though the Deoraithe are a hard shadow to escape in that art."

"Not much left to hunt or fish here," I replied. "Usually isn't, after the Dead King had a go."

If the Second Army was to make a stand against a wildly larger amount of enemy soldiers without getting butchered and overwhelmed, picking the ground it was going to make that stand

on was crucial. We'd dug through maps and records as well as the officers from Hainaut that Princess Beatrice had leant me before picking the abandoned village of Maillac, and for all that the place was a hole in the ground for our purposes it was perfect. See, for all that undead had less trouble with difficult terrain than living soldiers they didn't actually get to ignore that terrain. Swamps, bogs, or other combination of mud and scrub water and crawling things were easier for undead to go through because unlike people they wouldn't get cold or tired or sick – or even attacked by animals, usually.

But in no way did that mean a swamp was something easy for undead soldiers to march through.

The skeletons still wore armour, still weighed heavy, and as a rule tended to be significantly less deft and agile than living soldiers besides. Marching through a mire would wreak havoc on their lines and they'd be damned slow going through mud – or, if they weren't, would be so lightly armoured that our priests would scythe through them like wheat with volleys of Light. It was a comparative advantage the undead had, not an absolute one. And that meant that a place like Maillac made for very good grounds to defend: the village had stood on a relatively large peninsula surrounded by swamplands in every direction but the southeast, and with few trees in the immediate area that would obscure line of sight when the dead came from the west.

We wouldn't be able to fit the entire Second Army on the peninsula that locals apparently called 'the Boot' – seen from a high hill in the distance it looked vaguely boot-like, I'd been told after asking – as ten thousand soldiers would be much too many, but we could fit at least half and then position the rest on the broader solid grounds behind the peninsula, which were thankfully rather difficult to access. To the north and south there were rock formations and deep water, both of which would screw with enemy advance even worse than the swamps. That meant that open grounds around the Boot would be the best approach for the dead, short of circling rather far around.

Which sounded like a good idea for them, at first glance, as it would allowed them to attack us from solid land an attempt an encirclement of our army divided between the Boot and the broader shore. I almost hoped they made the mistake of attempting that, though, as the amount of time it would take them to both gather large enough forces and circle around us meant my army would get to delay the dead long enough for Prince Klaus to get away and then escape ourselves without even giving battle. While I might have chosen Maillac as a battle site first and foremost, I wouldn't complain if we got to evacuate it without first having fought said battle.

Not that we'd be so lucky. I'd stripped ten thousand legionaries and my finest horse from the rest of the army before dangling them like juicy bait out here in the wilds, the Dead King wasn't going to miss the opportunity to bloody us a bit. Still, I'd not come this far by leaving things to chance.

"I can see little use for the Order in the battlefield you have chosen us, Your Majesty," Sir Brandon admitted. "Yet it is not your habit to act without purpose, so I must presume there is one."

"The swamp would be hell on the horses, and you're much too heavy," I agreed. "But I don't actually intend for you to fight *here*, Talbot."

Blue eyes brightened with understanding.

"We are to go a'raiding, then," the Grandmaster smiled.

"And I with you," I agreed. "We'll be taking the Twilight Ways. Once the Second Army has begun setting up here, you and I are going to make such a nuisance out of the Order in these parts that Keter will *have* to come and give us a fight."

"To vex the Enemy is always a pleasure," the bearded knight said, sounding pleased. "Even more so if we confound him into an even greater defeat."

I looked at him, for a moment, and glimpsed the part of his kind that my people had loved for so long. That fearless, hardy breed of nobles that'd known sword and spear just as well as dances and laughed as they charged under the banners of the Fairfaxes and the Albans to turn back the invaders of the east and the west. War wasn't a trade to him, I thought, not like it was to the Legions and so many in the Army. War was part of who he was, just as much as his name or his blood. *War isn't just what we do, Catherine, it's what we are*, Juniper had once told me. She'd been speaking of her own people, that night, but so often I found that Praes and Callow were more deeply intertwined than either care to admit.

"I mean to do more than just vex," I said. "Half the world still sits up when our war horns are sounded, Talbot. I mean to brand that fear anew in the legions of the dead."

His fist struck his breastplate over his heart, the thump pleasantly solid to the ear.

"We are at your command, Queen Catherine," the knight said.

For a few years yet, I thought. It would be enough.

I would *make* it enough.

—

Sapper-General Pickler, whose notion of the decorum due to her rank usually varied between 'sounds like Commander Waffler's problem' and 'if I'm not covered in dust I'm no doing this right', crouched down on the shore and dipped a crooked green finger in the mud. After taking a long sniff, she licked it and hummed.

"So?"

"Rich silt," Pickler told me. "Good material. Mind you, mudbricks in this humid a locale would be foolish. There's clay, though, and we can use that for fired bricks. The trees in this dump aren't for much of anything, though. I'll need companies out foraging for decent firewood if we're going to be cooking bricks."

It was in moments like this that I was awe at what something like the War College actually stood for, what it achieved. That little exchange we'd just had alone was something that'd be impossible to have in most armies of our age. See, there were engineers in the ranks of Procer and the Free Cities with knowledge much like Pickler's. Neither goblins nor Praesi had a monopoly on such things. But none of these had the *rest*. Pickler had been taught about mages, so she understood that we couldn't just use spells to make her fired bricks: we'd half-kill our mages with exhaustion before we were anywhere done. Pickler had been taught about defensive tactics, so she knew how quickly I'd need the bricks and that if I didn't get enough making any was a waste of time: that meant making many fires, and firewood.

Pickler had been taught about limited manpower logistics, too, and so combining all these teachings in a few moments she'd put together a proposal. One tailored to the rough amount of people I'd be able to spare, and how many would be needed to achieve what needed to done in our current time strictures. In effect, several companies of regulars on rotation with attached mages for Twilight Ways access.

Most of the contemporary armies of my allies and enemies had all this knowledge, in practice, but none of them had it concentrated in the same person. Maybe a few exceptional fantassin captains might have most of these competences, or rare Helikean generals, but those individuals would be rare. My father had made the War College into a place that could make entire companies of those rare individuals *every year*. There were many who still thought the Conquest had been an outlier, an anomaly made possible only by the genius of the Black Knight and the Marshals of Callow. Those people were fools. The Conquest had been won in stone classrooms a decade before armies lined up on both sides of the Fields of Streges.

"You'll have them," I said. "How much can you fortify in two days?"

"The Boot will be walled up, and we'll have platforms for those of my ballistas you didn't hand off to your toy general," Pickler replied, a tad peevishly. "We'll have to use palisades for the part stretching between the end of the boot and the deep waters to the south. We won't be able to put up anything else in time."

I slowly nodded, fixing the picture in my mind's eyes. The peninsula was where I wanted clay walls the most, since it would be suffering the brunt of the enemy assault. Palisades to the south would get rough, given that Keter usually was capable of toppling those by throwing enough corpses at them – to say nothing of constructs or Revenants – but we weren't trying to make an invincible citadel out of this chunk of swamp. Favourable fighting grounds would have to be enough.

"And the northern grounds?" I pressed.

The peninsula on which Maillac was built looked like a boot fitted to a particularly fat foot, but it wasn't jutting out of perfectly straight dry – well, dryer anyway – land. To the south a wavy shoreline connected to the top edge of the boot kept going for about two hundred feet before jutting rocks and deep water made the grounds impractical to pass. As Pickler had said, we'd cover that stretch with palisades. But from the uppermost top edge of the boot the shoreline instead went straight for maybe forty feet before jutting upwards for a hundred feet and curving east into the second mass of rocks and deep water that were the reason I'd picked Maillac as our battlefield in the first place.

It meant there was a stretch of water between the Boot and the shore, which to make things even worse wasn't even particularly deep. Skeletons coming through the mire would use it as a ramp to flood our northern flank, it was pretty much a given.

"If we had a week I'd sink a stone wall and drain it," Pickler replied with a sigh that rattled through her teeth, "but we don't. The mud is too soft there, Catherine, and unlike the Boot or the deeper shore there's no solid layer to steady a palisade on."

I grimaced.

"So we make a fort deeper in and dig in for a rough fight," I summarized.

"I can make fortified nests for scorpions, with an eye to firing on anything that emerges from the water," my Sapper-General said. "But anything beyond that would take more time and hands than we have to spare."

She sounded almost apologetic, which was rare for her.

"These are imperfect grounds," I said. "I didn't expect you to wave a magic wand and make them into an impenetrable fortress. Already you're doing wonders, Pickler."

And I wasn't lying for her benefit there: that in the span of a mere two days my sappers would be able to turn this defensible stretch of swamp into a makeshift fortress was beyond impressive. When I'd made the decision to use only the Second Army and the Order as delaying forces, I'd been able to make that decision comfortably because I'd known almost half of the sapper corps remained with me instead of manning the siege engines that by now General Abigail would be using to reduce the Cigelin Sisters. I relied on my sappers a great deal, which I knew they took pride in, but I would not let the burden of unrealistic expectations crush them.

"I want to do more," Pickler admitted, to my surprise. "There won't be another war like this in my lifetime, Catherine. This is the one I'll get to fight, the one I'll get to make my teeth on."

She clicked her teeth, the flash of needle-like row betraying what had to be genuine irritation. Goblins were easier to read than humans, in some ways – most didn't bother to hide their body language the way a deceitful human would, since most of my race never learned goblin body subtext.

"I work with imperfect tools, the way all my predecessors have," Pickler said, "but it... irks, that I know we could be better. That we could match Keter blow for blow, if we had the time and the coin."

I hid a fond smile. Leave it to my Sapper-General to be irked by being on the lesser side in an arms race with the Hidden Horror. Even most heroes, those chosen few blessed with the belief of promised victory, usually limited their ambition to survival and eking out a win when it came to the Original Abomination. Yet Pickler of the High Ridge tribe had been forged of goblin steel tempered in Wasteland fire, kept sharp by the whetstone of the Uncivil Wars. When faced with dreadful might, the Sapper-General of Callow's nature was not to cower but to crave to surpass it.

"War's not over," I said. "One day it will take us to the gates of the Crown of the Dead itself, Pickler."

I offered her a smile.

"On that day, I expect you will find your coffers filled to burst and few requests beyond acquiescence," I said.

"Gobbler grant me breath until then," Pickler of the High Ridge tribe grinned, all teeth and malice, and offered a quick bow. "I'll get started on the work, Your Majesty."

I nodded back, mind already moving. The Order of Broken Bells was already mustering for the raids, picking out targets with General Hune and Hakram, and now my Sapper-General had assignments and hands to see it through. It was time, then, to see to the... irregulars.

—

I'd begun with Masego because I'd figured it would be less unsettling to look at than whatever it was that Akua wanted the Rapacious Troubadour for, but alas it seemed that hubris had come around to bite me in the tit. That Hierophant would be standing atop a flat floating stone was sadly not unexpected, nor were the smaller rocks circling around him with visibly shifting runes carved into them. That the Grey Pilgrim would be stand with him there, though, head cocked to the side as if he were listening to someone talking as he *corrected* some of the runework, very much was.

"- being very helpful," I heard Zeze say, tone appreciative. "I could talk to Catherine about remuneration, if you'd like, or draw from Arsenal discretionary funds."

Well, that was nice of him.

"A kind thought," Tariq drily replied, "but the Ophanim require no compensation for their help."

Wait, had he been talking about paying the Choir of Mercy? Godsdamnit, Masego, we *definitely* didn't have room for that in the budget. I cleared my throat as I got closer, as it seemed both of them were too involved with their work to be paying attention to their surroundings.

"Catherine," Hierophant greeted me. "Come to have a look?"

"You might say that," I replied. "Pilgrim, always a pleasure to see you."

I did not bother to specify that I'd not actually expected to see him, though, as it was pretty much implied by his mere presence here.

"And you," the old man said, sounding amused. "We have been lending a hand to the Lord Hierophant, you see, as his work has proved to have... surprising provenances."

"I figured out how angels smite people," Zeze said, sounding very pleased with himself. "More or less. When the Ophanim tried to kill us all at Lyonceau I got a good look."

"That was not their intent at all," Tariq sighed. "The death of the Tyrant of Helike – a necessity, I'm sure you'll agree – was all that was sought."

"By smiting," Masego helpfully specified. "Which I am now reproducing, only without the angels."

"Are you now," I faintly said. "How lovely."

I looked to the Pilgrim, expecting an elaboration but receiving only a blithe shrug.

"It's not an inaccurate description," Tariq said. "They're very interested in seeing if it works."

"Are they now," I said, tone grown even fainter. "That's nice."

"Now," Masego said, "I know what you're thinking."

He tried to lean against a rotating stone but mistimed it and almost stumbled off the floating stone, the Pilgrim discreetly pulling at his robes so he wouldn't.

"I doubt that," I noted, "but go on."

"If a Choir does not power the smiting, what *does*?" Hierophant enthusiastically asked.

"The bone-deep existential dread of all who witness your works?" I suggested.

"Too narrow, but you're along the right path," Masego encouraged me.

I glanced at Tariq.

"I thought you Light-wielding types had objections to blasphemy," I said.

And this felt, like, maybe two or three steps past simple blasphemy. I'd say we were uncovering fresh new heretical horizons, but that was always a hard claim to make for anyone remotely familiar with Praesi history.

"Smiting is being used as a purely technical term here, with no religious connotations," the Grey Pilgrim serenely replied.

Tariq, you shit, I uncharitably thought.

"Besides, if this endeavour succeeds it may be possible to reproduce it purely using Light," the old man airily continued.

Meaning that Zeze's brain was being utterly terrifying, as usual, but that in this particular case it might lead to a skill usable for heroes down the line – and Crows, wasn't *that* particular prospect worth a fucking shiver or two? – so he was willing to not only refrain from objecting but actively help. I narrowed my eyes at the smiling old man, knowing Goods might just be getting the better bargain here. There was no guaranteed that Hierophant would ever be able to pass this down to anyone else on my side, so the knowledge might very well die out. The Choir of Mercy, though, would not forget a damned thing.

And the Ophanim were not, in my experience, shy about handing out this sort of knowledge to their favourites.

"How fortunate," I replied with a grunt. "What is it you're using, Masego?"

"I had thought to use Night, at first," the dark-skinned mage idly said, "but Sve Noc did not seem willing. So instead we will draw on Arcadia for power and use runework to give the power shape."

I blinked.

"And that'll work?" I asked

"Should it not, I expect the result will be a large explosion followed by temporary instability in the weave of Creation on a local level," Tariq noted.

"We can use that too," Masego happily told me. "So there's really no downside."

I closed my eyes and breathed out. Well, he wasn't exactly *wrong*. Mind you, Zeze tended to be very reasonable even when suggesting utter lunacy so that wouldn't be a first. And this seemed like a functioning weapon, if an unstable and dangerous one. I opened my eyes.

"This won't hurt our own?" I asked.

"No," Masego replied, tone serious. "Precautions were taken. It will not kill your soldiers."

"Then all hail the mighty smiters," I drily said. "Have fun, you two, and try not to bring down Arcadia Resplendent on our heads."

Which might have been a tad hypocritical of me to say, I mentally acknowledged as I limped at and left them to their work, since *I* was the one who kept stealing lakes from there.

—

I caught a few bits of the song on the wind before I saw either of them, the almost mournful tone of the Troubadour's voice matching the sad strums of his cithern. The tent was wide open, leaving the song to take to the sky unhindered.

"- we of steel,

Forged in the east

As turns the wheel

And carrion feast."

I knew precious few Praesi songs, unless you counted Legion ones, but this one I'd heard of before. *The Tyranny of the Sun*, it was called, an old war song from the days of the Sixty Years War. It'd been banned since, but banning a song only rarely succeeded at stamping it out. Making it forbidden tended to raise interest, if anything. The few Praesi tunes I'd heard – *Count the Nights*, *Upon All the World* and *Burning Kiss* – tended towards the boastful or the romantic, not the almost wistful beat of this one. It was, I suddenly recalled, a favourite of my father's. Given that this had to be a request if Akua's, I almost smiled at the thoughts.

Neither of them would be particularly pleased to hear they had something in common, even something as small as a liking for a song.

I found the both of them seated inside. The Rapacious Troubadour was sprawled indolently in a chair, long crooked fingers dancing across his cithern as he smiled. Dark-haired and pale, the man would have been handsome if not for the too-red lips and insincere eyes. Though he wore armour when battle was at hand, he rarely bothered without immediate danger to move him: his tunic and cloak were of tasteful cut and good make, in shades of purple, while both trousers and boots were leather. He'd been looking at Akua with something like hunger in his gaze when I entered, though he immediately averted his eyes. *Ah, but is it the looks or the soul that draw your attention?*

The shade herself had claimed a small table and a folding chair, leaning forward with quill and parchment in hand – which bared an interesting expanse of smooth skin, given the generous neckline of her red dress patterned with what looked like peacock feathers in blue. I'd seen enough of Akua actively trying to appeal to suspect she wasn't even trying to be enticing at the moment. She was just good-looking enough that even at work it looked like she was posing for a painting.

"Dearest," the devil in question said, raising her head to smile at me. "How kind of you to visit."

The Troubadour eased into an interruption of the song, the notes fading naturally, and then offered me a short bow.

"Your Majesty," Lucien greeted me. "Ever a pleasure."

"Is it now?" I mused. "Good to know."

"Do not bully my singer," Akua chided me. "He has been singing the loveliest songs."

"The Tyranny of the Sun?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"Somewhat maudlin, I know," she smiled, "but it has such a pleasant melody."

I smiled at her, knowing something she did not and amused by the secret.

"Got anything out of it?" I asked, glancing at her parchment.

A magical formula, by the looks of it. I could recognize certain parts of it from our lessons – wait, no, this was a ritual but it was meant to be used with Night. It just looked like sorcery because she was basing its workings on Trismegistan principles. I leaned in, frowning as I took a closer look. The scale of the power used would be large, since she was using the notations that meant every number mean should be multiplied by a thousand, but the duration would be... short? Maybe just a few breaths. And I wasn't recognizing the end of her formula at all, there wasn't even a boundary strength or an allowed variance.

Mind you, for all my lessons I was still essentially a drunken monkey trying to decipher the works of one of the greats of our age so my incomprehension should not be a surprise.

"I believe so," Akua smiled. "It occurred to me, my heart, that the strengths of Night lie in its flexibility. Yet this comes at the price of a weakness, namely that it is only ever second best in all the many things it can accomplish."

If even that, I thought. I called it the power of a thief for a reason. She wasn't wrong, though, and if anything she was underselling it: given equal Night and Light on both sides of a struggle, Light would win ten times out of ten. Entities wielding Light and Night weren't necessarily bound to that outcome, mind you, but in a straight fight it had to be said that Light always won. Considering that the prevailing theory was that Light had been made by the Gods Above when Creation was first built and that Night was only indirectly the work of the Gods Below, that made a great deal of sense to me.

"Let's say I agree," I replied. "What follows?"

"A great deal of power that could benefit from a... more defined method of channeling," Akua said. "One more deeply aligned with Creation."

I studied her for a moment, then discreetly flicked my eyes towards the Rapacious Troubadour. Her smile widened.

"Huh," I said. "Is that... wise?"

She read between the lines, catching on to my very delicate question of 'are you *sure* using the soul-eating villain as a Night-channel isn't going to fuck us over?'.

"It is my ritual," she easily replied. "It remains in my hands from beginning to end."

Meaning that the Rapacious Troubadour would be a ritual component more than an active participant. Ah, I was already slightly more comfortable with this. Still not exactly eager, but damned few of the tricks we needed to win this war were anything that could reasonably be called safe.

"And you're sure you'll get results," I said.

"I have proved the underlying principles," Akua said, and leaned back as if to offer me a closer look at her notes.

Yeah, that would serve no real purpose. I had an almost decent handle on basic Trismegistan spell formulas these days – might not be able to *make* one, but was reliably able to pick out which part did what – but taking a gander at the kind of work that lay behind crafting an entirely new ritual, one working and Night and somehow involving a Named, would be absurd. I did not have the knowledge to parse the knowledge necessary to grasp the principles behind the basics of what was involved there.

"I'll take you to your word," I easily said. "But what is it your ritual will do, exactly?"

She gestured for me to come closer and whispered the answer in my ear. I drew back with a startled look.

"You're sure?" I asked.

"The effects could be inferior to my expectations, but there will be effects," Akua calmly said. "Of that there can be no doubt."

I let out a low whistle.

"Well, here's hoping it takes fully," I said. "It would make a real difference, and not just in the coming battle."

"I expect Trismegistus will mend the weakness eventually," the shade shrugged. "Yet for now we have the element of surprise, so a success can be reasonably hoped for."

Mhm. She'd not used that name as a coincidence: it was a veiled reminder that there was a reason Praesi magic was called *Trismegistan* sorcery. We were using his own methods against him, which meant our advantage was likely to be quite temporary.

"I'll dare hope for it, then," I said. "Did I glimpse correctly that you'll be using a song?"

"Indeed," Akua said, sounding pleased. "Do you have a particular preference? Lucien has proved to have a remarkable repertoire at his disposal."

I glanced at the smiling man in question. Yeah I figured he would, what with all the godsdamned souls he'd eaten.

"It's your ritual," I said. "Let it be your song as well."

"You do me honour," the golden-eyed beauty said. "As it happens, I did have a thought."

"Oh?"

"*Stars From the Sky*," Akua said in Mtethwa. "It is ancient, but remains sung for good reason."

"Never heard of it," I replied, "but I'll look forward to mending that."

She inclined her head.

"I will endeavour," Akua Sahelian smiled, "not to disappoint."

Chapter 66: Blind Pigs

"I climbed the Tower at seventeen, Chancellor, and for ten years I have held it. So before you bare your knife at my back, ask yourself this – would you really be the first to try?"

– Dread Emperor Nihilis I, the Tanner

Flat and open grounds sat before us, the earth black and musky.

The sun peeked out solemnly from behind the cover of clouds, a wet and lazy breeze licking at the skin as the summer heat saw droplets gather and slither down the armour of my knights. Hidden near the edge of a thicket of oak and poplars, we watched as in the distance as a warband of armed corpses shambled forward. They were taking the same eastward trail that a hundred other like

them had, over nights and days. There'd been no need of a tracker to find that well-beaten track. There was a name, I idly remembered, for this place. There was a village not too far, a mark on a map where men had lived and a lord had ruled. It slipped my mind, despite my best efforts, but I did not grieve myself the lapse. We had fought a dozen skirmishes in as many different places since morning, and by now they were beginning to meld into each other.

"Seven hundred or thereabouts, my queen," Sir Brandon Talbot said. "And our outriders are adamant the closest warband is the better part of an hour away."

I laid a hand on the neck of Zombie the Sixth, feeling him breathe in and out slowly. The stallion was a pale brown Salamans *zancada*, a breed favoured by both leisure racers and the light cavalry that Arlesites were so fond of. A gift from Princess Beatrice Volignac, and not an inexpensive one. I supposed I did qualify as light horse nowadays, since all I wore for armour was a breastplate with tassets and upper vambraces over an aketon – and the Mantle of Woe, over it all. It was a waste to give such a fine horse to a rider as ferociously average as myself, in my opinion, especially when I usually preferred riding dead horses to live ones. Yet it would have been unmannerly to refuse it, and while the Order had remounts they were from lesser breeds so I didn't even have a good reason to do so.

I fully expected Zombie the Sixth to die before the end of the day, though, which would properly earn him his name would solve the issue anyway. I'd seriously debated killing him and raising him before Hakram got me to admit it would be somewhat unpolitic of me.

"Then we take them," I said. "Have the horns sounded, Grandmaster Talbot."

"It will be my pleasure," the bearded knight replied with a hard grin.

He pulled one-handed on the reins of his purebred Liessen charger, leading away the large horse at a trot and shouting out his orders. The knights carrying long banners, both the Order's own cracked bronze bells on black as well as my own Sword and Crown, brought the silver-banded horns hanging around their necks to their lips and blew. One, twice, thrice. The deep call echoed across the grounds of Hainaut, giving that age-old order my people knew the way they dawn: *all knights, charge*. I watched, hidden in the shade of a tall poplar tree. The dead had enough Binds among them that they began to mobilize before the Order had even begun to emerge from the cover of the trees, but the warband had been spread out in a loose column for the march. They would not gather quickly enough. Split into four wedges of five

hundred, two on each side of the path, my knights lowered their lances and broke into a gallop.

My staff of yew resting against Zombie's neck, my sword still sheathed, I waited with the remounts and the squires in the woods as the Order fell on the dead like packs of wolves. It was with a twinge of satisfaction that I watched lowered killing lances, engraved with hymns to the Heavens, scythe through the thin ranks of the enemy as large armoured horses trampled the surprised undead. All four wedges broke through the enemy lines, not allowing themselves to be drawn into melee but instead punching straight through. In good order, they gathered again and wheeled around to charge anew from fresh angles. Most undead were incapable of so much as denting the armour of my knights, and this column was low on javelinmen: maybe a score wounded and fewer dead were all it took before most the Binds were dead and the warband dissolved into a disorderly mass of corpses.

From there the knights of the Order of the Broken Bell went at it with cold and practiced efficiency, using the tactics developed over years of fighting Keter. A wedge skimmed the edge of the mass of the dead, drawing the enemy forward, only for two others to flank it with deadly charges. Before a protracted melee could ensure, all three wedges withdrew and the fourth wedge of unengaged knights went forward to serve as fresh bait for a repeat of the manoeuvre. Binds would have punished such a repetition, but skeletons simply did not learn from their mistakes. It was grim and bloody work that followed, but repetitive and the danger involved was not as great as might look: unless pulled down from their mount, few of my knights were truly at risk unless the enemy got lucky.

It had all been going quite well, which was why I half-expected it when horns sounded from the woods on the other side of the open grounds. There would be squires and horses in that opposite thicket as well, though I could hardly see any of them, and it must be one of their number that was blowing the call for danger – two short, sharp sounds. My staff left Zombie's neck and I spurred him forward without a word, ignoring the squires asking after me. Talbot had named 'officers' among them, lead squires, so it was not my job to hold their hand. My horse's long and certain stride took us out of the woods and slightly downslope onto the battleground even as I kept an eye on the currents there. Talbot was in command, and he'd prudently ordered two wedges to draw the skeletons away while assembling the other two to head back to the squires.

Quick as he'd been, the enemy was quicker still. Panicked horses, the remounts of a thousand knights, were led hastily out of the woods by mounted squires in mail even as screams and the sound of fighting came from deeper in. I led Zombie into a hasty gallop, trampling a skeleton that tried to stand in my way in a crunch of

steel-clad hooves, and broke into the shaded thicket even as another pack of squires fled it. They parted around me, and I glimpsed shame on some of those faces. Given what I glimpsed deeper in, though, there was truly none to be had. It was a man, if one long dead. The shoddy hide armour – little more than a vest – he wore over tattered shirt and trousers did nothing to distinguish him from the zombies Keter threw at soldiers by the hundreds, but the long blood-red hair and ancient claymore were... distinctive.

He padded forward on bare feet, blood dripping from the edge of his great sword as a smile accentuated the vertical tattooed red stripes around his mouth. The Drake, we'd taken to calling him. Against a Revenant of that calibre there was nothing my soldiers could do but die.

"Retreat," I ordered the remainder, voice laced with power.

The squires scattered to the four winds, save for one who'd been too close – the Drake approached and the girl swung down her sword at his head, but the Revenant easily stepped around it. Zombie's stride had not slowed and my staff rose as I gathered Night around the tip, but even that was too slow. In a single casual stroke, the Drake swung down and blood sprayed as he carved through the squire and the horse beneath her. I grit my teeth, letting loose a spinning javelin of Night at the Revenant that caught him in the ribs and shredded flesh and bone. The impact smashed him into a tree, making it crack, and the hide armour was smoldering around the edges. It wouldn't do shit to this particular horror, though, I well knew. I passed the falling halves of the dead squire, unsheathing my sword as I began gathering Night again, but already flesh and bone had knitted themselves back together.

The Drake, laughing, cracked a shoulder and wrenched himself free of the tree.

"Black Queen," the Revenant nonchalantly greeted me. "Yours, then?"

Five times I'd tried to kill that murderous cockroach, and never managed it. Once I'd so thoroughly incinerated his corpse that all that'd been left had been a single hand, and still he'd walked out of that battlefield on two feet. Whatever it was the Dead King had done to this one, it'd made him durable beyond reason. Even wounds inflicted with Light came back in a matter of moments. His capacity to recover from damage might genuinely surpass what my body had been able to do at the peak of my time holding Winter.

"Drake," I coldly replied, deadwood staff levelled at him. "They were. *Burn.*"

A howling gout of blackflame erupted from the tip, swallowing him whole before beginning to spin on itself at my direction. I heard bits of crazed laughter through even the roar of the dark fire as I used my knees to guide Zombie away from the blaze. *Fuck*, this one was always a pain to contain. I had enough hard-hitting ranged tricks that if I could catch him at a distance he wasn't a major threat, but I'd yet to find anything that could actually put him down for good and not for lack of trying. Time to pull out my forces and find a softer target. Zombie slowed on the turn and I leant to the side to better slam the butt of my staff against the ground, drawing deep on Night and hastily shaping it. Thin threads of darkness skittered along the ground, running up trunks and binding trees as they hooked themselves deep.

The Drake leapt out of the flames, naked and burnt but already healing, just in time for me to wrench with my will and smash him down into the ground with a dozen bound trees. I heard bones break and organs pulp, his broken body stuck under the massive weight. That ought to slow him for a span, until I could get something sterner in place.

"That-" the Revenant began, then paused to spit out a thick glob of blood, "-that was unkind."

Of all the dead Named in Keter's service he might just be the chattiest, and the Dead King did seem to have left him most of his will and wits. It made him more flexible – the same tactics rarely worked twice against him – but it also meant he fell more easily into distractions. Getting him talking tended to work, especially if it was about himself.

"I've been curious," I idly asked, drawing on Night. "How long did it take, before you turned?"

One more working to keep him stuck there for a bit then I'd retreat. The sooner I got my knights away from him the better. It might be worth coming back afterwards to have a crack at destroying him, though, I silently considered. Better here and now than at Maillac.

"Fifty three years," the Drake amiably replied. "Would that I had bent at forty, that last decade was... inventive."

I knew from experience that impaling him wouldn't work for long – his healing was so aggressive that it shredded whatever went through him by sheer pressure – and that quartering only held him so long. He'd been physically strong even by Named standards, I suspected. It was burying alive that'd worked best so far, so I got to it methodically. Shaping Night into large blades I manipulated to cut a rough cube into the ground, I then shaped another working and ripped out the loose earth as if with great claws. I'd need to drag him into the hole before burying him, though, so best get the strings spun out already. I wasn't always

quick enough to snatch him when I wove them on the fly. Still, thank the Gods I'd caught him in the woods instead of on an open field. He was much harder to deal with without terrain to use. I spun out five threads, then threw in a sixth just to be sure and thickened them, then –

Darkness fell over the woods, pure and inky black. *Shit*, I thought, immediately releasing all my workings. *Mantle's here too*. Was this an ambush? I threw myself off my horse, ripping my boots out of the stirrups, and felt Zombie kick about in a panic. I slapped his rump with the side of my staff so he'd know to run before spinning it about, smashing it into the ground. A tremor of Night shivered across the forest floor, sending the earth I'd loosened flying in a rain that should obscure Mantle's vision just as she'd obscured mine. My consistent inability to see through her darkness while it did not impede her was one of the many reasons I fucking hated dealing with that particular Revenant. Still, this made it two from the nebulous roster that our heroes liked to call the Scourges. It really was beginning to smell like ambush to my nose.

I'd begun to count in the back of my mind the moment things went dark and I kept it up even as I threw up an obscuring veil of Night around myself and ducked behind where I remembered to be a tree. The tree blew up a moment later, though I heard no noise and only knew because I felt the shiver and wood shards ripping into my cloak. I slid further down, closer to the roots, as something whizzed near my head, knowing a helmet would have made no difference if a curse hit but still chastising myself for the lack of it anyway. *Cocky gets you killed, Catherine*, I reminded myself. *You don't grow back limbs anymore*. The last three beats separating me from the count of sixteen passed agonizingly slowly, but when the timing struck I was ready.

The darkness winked out, revealing the Drake halfway through a leap in my direction with his claymore raised high and his crimson hair trailing behind, but I wove a thread of Night around his foot and without missing a beat I tossed him in the direction the strike on my tree should have come from. I knew I'd got it right when something ripped through my thread a moment later. Mantle had been some sort of priestess when she lived, and in death those gifts had turned towards the use of curses. Most of them worked against Night, which meant her specialty was shredding my own workings while being twice my size and heavily armored. I liked fighting Mantle even less than I did the Drake, and with her addition to the roster this was starting to look a mite risky. If it'd been a more vulnerable pair I would have embraced an occasion to try knocking off a first-class Revenant before the Dead King could put them to even sharper use, but this wasn't a good match up for me at all.

It was, to be frank, *suspiciously* bad. If Tariq or Masego had been around to counter Mantle it might have been tempted to roll the dice anyway, but as things stood... No, I wouldn't let pride get in the way of good sense here. Our objectives for this raid were either already achieved or beyond reach, so it was time to get the Hells out of here.

I opened a gate into Arcadia about six feet behind me and twenty feet high, making it broad and linked to water: the deluge pouring out served as my cover as I forced myself up and limped away. A wave of heat followed by the hiss of vapour told me the nature of Mantle's answer, but I did not stop to glance back. I wouldn't outrun either of them, given my limp, and just fleeing into Twilight wasn't acceptable when the Order would be relying on me to return there. So when I opened a gate into the Twilight Ways, it wasn't to go in: it was to allow something *out*. The ghostly blue wyvern that squeezed its way through lowered its wing so I could go up it and slid me onto its back by angling it. My water portal, though, could only buy me so long.

I felt it get shredded, and a heartbeat later a wide net of crackling shadow flew towards us. On the ground I glimpsed the Drake hastening towards us, so swift-footed his claymore dragged behind him.

"Up," I ordered the wyvern, already drawing on Night.

I detonated the air in front of the net thrice, in a broad line, but though my enemy's working wavered it did not break. That was fine, since all I'd wanted was to slow it. The Summoner's wyvern-thing shot up just in time to avoid the net, batting its wings to pierce through the summit of the trees, but we weren't done yet. Dark grey clouds began to form above us in a ring, and I held on for dear life I shouted for the wyvern to bank away. It did, narrowly, and only the tip of its tail touched the clouds. I'd seen this one before and... wait, what? The tail was just fine. *Fuck*, I thought as I glanced down and saw the Drake flying through the air towards us. It'd been a trick, she'd been buying time to throw him.

I loosed two spinning missiles of the same make as earlier, hoping to knock him back down, but he batted one aside – the claymore was enchanted, it didn't even get a scratch – and spun on himself to narrowly avoid the other. If we'd kept going straight we would have avoided him, but Mantle's bluff had paid off. Gods but I hated fighting clever opponents. There was no way I was allowing myself to be forced to engage the Drake up close, much less atop a moving magical construct, so with a grimace I glanced down at the woods and breathed out before taking a leap. Hopefully the wyvern would slow down the Revenant some. I wove a veil around myself on the way down, which proved to be a sound

precautions when a spray of shard-like pieces of darkness tore through the air coming from below.

I flared out my cloak to slow my fall some, letting them pass below, and only then broke the veil to form tendrils of shadow that anchored themselves on one of the rapidly approaching trees. Using those I threw myself towards the open grounds, just in time for the tendrils to be torn through by Mantle as above me the wyvern-thing screeched. A glance told me the Drake had ripped into its belly and it was quickly falling apart. The dead priestess had never undone the second gate I'd opened, though, the one the construct had come through, and a heartbeat later she was made to pay for that oversight. A ring of dark clouds that'd been forming ahead of me – the genuine acidic version this time, I was guessing – suddenly dispersed out as Archer made her presence known.

I heard a cry of anger, but I couldn't see what was going on from up here. Still, given that Indrani was involved it was safe to assume that Mantle was having a bad time.

I had other priorities anyway, to be honest, though before shaping a way to slow my descent I still took the time to form a thread of Night, snatching the Drake's foot after he leapt off the shattering wyvern-construct and throwing him deeper into the woods. It had little room for manoeuvre, afterwards, so I brute-forced the landing by smashing the ground beneath me and then using the blowback to slow my fall. I swallowed a scream as my bones rattled and my bad leg burned with pain, but I landed on my feet and only stumbled after taking three slow steps forward. I swallowed a curse and a moan of pain, picking up the sword I'd dropped to sheathe it and forcing myself up by leaning on my staff. In the back of my mind I finally felt my last portal get shredded.

Not that it mattered. From the woods ahead of me, where the Order was gathering to retreat, I saw three arrows arcs upwards in quick succession. Archer was a prodigy at sidling, she'd be able to slip in and out of this battlefield more or less at will and shoot from her pick of places. The last of the undead had gone off to chase my knights in the distance, so unless the Revenants caught up we were safe to retreat. Best hurry just in case. I wasn't looking forward to limping all the way, but – *huh*. Zombie the Sixth nonchalantly trotted up to my side, seemingly unworried by the skirmishing that'd taken place since we last saw each other. The purebred *zancada* slowed at my side, as if inviting me to saddle up again.

"Good horse," I praised, genuinely impressed.

Might be I'd still get some use of him living after all. I slid a boot into a stirrup and dragged myself back into the saddle, speeding away back into the woods. With Archer harassing the

enemy we ought to be able to retreat in relative peace, I figured, but there was no point in wasting time.

We still had a few raids in us before exhaustion set in.

—

"There's a saying in back home, Catherine," Adjutant gravelled in Kharsum. "It goes 'a hunter cannot carry a cookpot'."

I leaned back into my seat in the tent that soldiers had raised for me in the heart of the Boot, along with those of a few other high officers. Sipping at a mug of tea, I was wishing I'd taken up Indrani on her offer of a massage even though odds were that would have devolved in more strenuous activity. After most of a day riding and fighting, my entire body felt like one throbbing bruise and no quantity of herbal brew was going to fix that.

"I mean, depends on the hunter," I mused. "But I'm guessing I'm missing some of the nuances."

Hakram was seated in his wheelchair, but all the same he was looking rather different: he had, after all two legs again. The prosthetic leg looked grim, all grey iron and leather, but it was him who'd chosen the appearance – he'd turned down the appearance of flesh or even a more polished casing in metal. It was still closed enough I couldn't see the enchanted strands of copper that'd been tied to his muscles, fooling his body into thinking there was still a flesh leg to use, but the articulations around the ankle could be glimpsed. Now and then he moved the foot, as if to check that he still could. He couldn't actually walk on this, not yet. There was still need of an operation on the hip to fix the cut bones there and shore it up so the pressure wouldn't damage his side.

This was a first step, and the operation had been done in part so see if there would be any trouble with his body acclimating to the prosthetic. Masego would have preferred starting with the arm, but Hakram had been adamant otherwise. I could see both sides. Zeze wanted to minimize the risk, as if disease or spellrot took the arm would be much easier to heal, while Adjutant knew that starting with the arm instead of a leg meant at least two more months before he could begin trying to walk with crutches. Masego had insisted on leaving time for recovery between the surgeries so the body would be strained as little as possible and the chances of rejecting the limbs were lowest. Still, in the end it was a choice that was Hakram's alone to make.

So long as he knew the risks, it was not my or anyone else's place to gainsay his decision.

"It is a figure of speech," Hakram said. "Those specific words for hunter and cookpot were picked because they sound like those for swift and slow, respectively. It means even victory weighs you down, if you're not careful."

Cookpot, huh. We both knew it wasn't just mutton that ended up in there. Ah, implied cannibalism. That backbone of ancient orcish wisdom.

"Not the most promising of segues after I asked you to summarize our scouting reports," I drily noted. "Shall I take it things aren't exactly looking up?"

"This isn't the war to fight, if you're looking for pleasant turns," Hakram snorted. "And my people are still taking in reports as we speak, so take all this with a grain of salt."

My brow rose.

"Wow," I said. "It must be *really* bad if you're prefacing this much."

"You did exactly what you set out to achieve," Adjutant gallantly set. "Which was provoke the columns headed towards the Iron Prince into battle here."

"So we drew them in," I warily said. "That was the plan. What's the issue?"

"You drew them in," Adjutant repeated.

I blinked.

"And?"

"You drew them *all* in," Adjutant clarified. "As far as we can tell there's not a single warband, battalion or even individual construct east of us that's not headed towards Maillac as quick as its legs can carry it."

I paused, glancing down at the mug of tea that was inexplicably not aragh. A shameful oversight, that.

"Well," I faintly said. "Klaus and our reinforcements should be winning their battle handily, at least."

I'd been a little worried that even the raids by the Order of Broken Bells wouldn't be enough to convince Keter to keep its eye on us, that the Dead King would write off the losses and still try to concentrate his forces against the Prince of Hannover while we bled him, but it seemed like my seasoned pessimism had come all the way around and somehow become a different kind of naïve optimism. It was almost like doing magic, I thought, except for the part where every part of this was terrible.

"I have mastered a new and terrible art," I mused, going fishing through faded lessons on Old Miezán. "Fortunomancy, I believe it would be called."

"That would be luck magic," Hakram commented. "Which would be useful, and I believe is actually practiced in some parts of southern Procer under a different name. You're looking for infelicitomancy, which would be the branch of sorcery entirely about *bad* luck."

"Thank you, Adjutant," I gravely replied. "I would offer you my blessing for your service in this matter, but I fear a lightning strike would not be far."

"They never are, when Masego's around," he agreed. "Though considering we're about to be swimming up to our necks in undead, perhaps we could do with a few more."

I grimaced, because that was too true for words.

"What kind of numbers are we looking at?" I asked.

"Depend on how long we fight," Hakram said. "The first skirmishers will arrive by Early Bell, we reckon, but the first assault shouldn't come until midday. Maybe twenty thousand, for that first wave?"

We could handle twenty thousand. Even if you discounted the Order of Broken Bells entirely, it was only a two to one numbers advantage for the dead while my people were properly dug-in and ready. The trouble would be that this wasn't the whole battle, it was just the first fucking wave. It'd get worse, much worse. And unlike the skeletons my people would tire the longer it lasted.

"Do we have an opening for retreat?" I asked.

That would be the key. If we were at genuine risk of being surrounded and wiped out – or close enough – during a retreat into the Twilight Ways then I'd have to call an early retreat. *Which might be the point*, I thought. *The Dead King's calling my bluff, and if I retreat now he'll hack at Klaus' back while having lost less than a day's worth of march.*

"Between the second and the third wave, there should be a beat of four to six hours before the enemy can gather sufficient strength to be a threat," Hakram gravelled. "If we use our pharos device it should be enough."

Given our very limited stock of those I was always reluctant to use them, but this was a dire situation and the Iron Prince would have several of them with his army anyway. I'd swallow the loss, considering the circumstances.

"Second wave?" I asked.

"Thirty to forty thousand," Adjutant said. "At least. Constructs in significant numbers. And while I cannot be sure, I'd be surprised if most of the Revenants with the columns couldn't make in there in time as well."

So, to make it out without being badly mauled then we would need to beat two armies outnumbering us significantly in the same day, and beat them badly enough that the losses inflicted meant the enemy would not have the numbers to press us significantly while we retreated back into the Twilight Ways. We would, no doubt, also be facing the latest batch of horrors from Keter and some of the Dead King's finest Revenants. I set down my mug of tea, my hand surprisingly steady considering what lay ahead of us.

"Well," I smiled, hard and toothy. "You know our policy when it comes scraps like this, Adjutant. I see no reason to change it at so late an hour."

He laughed.

"Let them take a swing?" Hakram Deadhand asked, baring sharp fangs.

"Let them take a swing," I softly agreed. "There are still graves we have yet to fill."

Chapter 67: Isolani

"Kill a man and they will call you a murderer. Kill a hundred and it is a massacre, slaughter a thousand and it will be war. But kill a hundred thousand, a million? That carnage is the sole province of gods. Ancient Keter revealed this truth for all to see: apotheosis is simply bloodshed beyond mortal ken."

— Kayode Owusu, Warlock under Dread Emperors Vindictive I and Nihilis

I slept through the beginning of the Battle of Maillac's Boot.

Adjutant's prediction of the first enemy skirmishers arriving by Early Bell proved to be somewhat optimistic, as the first skulkers were caught half past Midnight Bell instead. Ghouls out front instead of skeletons, a sure sign that something with brains was planning out the offensive – they were significantly better at keeping out of sight. Pickler's wall on the peninsula was done and the palisade raised to the south but the fort guarding the northern shore had not yet been finished and so it was there that the ghouls tried to slip in. They got caught by goblin legionaries, fangs and claws proving no match for knives

and crossbows when they came attached to a pair of eyes that could see in the dark.

It was only the first of the enemy's probes at our defences under cover of night, which my commanders had well known. Watches were doubled and magelights brought out as lone ghouls turned into packs swimming through the muck and skeletons began to march at the bottom of the swamp. An assault on the palisade was handily thrown back, though worryingly enough the ghouls had been more interested in clawing at the wood than climbing up to assault my soldiers. The Boot itself was only tried more cautiously, ghouls revealing themselves several times in the distance in an attempt to bait out fire from our engines.

Pickler's boys had better discipline than that, thankfully, so despite their efforts the enemy were kept in the dark about our range and the nature of our engines. One of Hune's legates, who went by the name of Paltry, had been in command at the time and he'd requested the Order of Broken Bells to send patrols along the shoreline just in case. They found no enemies, however, and the dead bade their time with only a few more minor attacks under cover of dark. The first genuine assault came halfway past Early Bell, and even if I'd not already been breaking my fast while reading reports the ruckus of it would have woken me.

I hastily scarfed down the rest of my eggs – weren't as good now that Hakram wasn't the one cooking them, no one else got the seasoning quite right – and snatched up my staff before limping out in to the cold morning light, running into the secretary from the phalanges that Adjutant had sent to speak to me. An assault on the palisade, the young woman told me, by skeleton mages and ghouls.

"Reinforcements were already being sent in when I left," she said, tucking back a curl of dark hair just a little too long to be allowed under Army regulations.

The adjunct secretariat weren't part of the Army of Callow, though, I reminded myself. They were Hakram's and no one else's, though he'd often drawn on my armies for recruitment.

"The assault will have been driven back by the time we can arrive, Your Majesty," she continued, "so the Lord Adjutant suggests that you finish your breakfast instead of-"

"I left a mug of tea in there," I mused, "have it brought to the palisade, would you?"

I tore open a gate into Twilight and stepped through, the warmer breeze of that journeyer's realm a pleasant change from the clime of Hainaut. While limping my way there would have taken me too long and there was no denying it, I had a shortcut at hand. Wasn't hard to make it there, the starlit compass guiding my

steps, and I limped out of a portal to the sight of a dozen crossbows and twice as many swords pointed at me. I smiled approvingly at the sight, eyes scanning our surroundings for a threat.

"At ease," I said.

I'd aimed to come out at ground level, since there might be fighting on the palisade walkway, but there was no sight of the dead there. Wasn't hard to hazard a guess as to why, given that the Grey Pilgrim was up there and healing a captain whose eyes and cheek looked like it had quite literally been bitten off. I left him to that for the moment, instead looking for an officer among the crowd just now beginning to put away their weapons. There was a sergeant, stout orc lad with dark green skin and the kind of vivid scar across his nose that his people highly prized as display of strength.

"Sergeant, your name?" I asked.

"Alvar, ma'am," the lieutenant hastily replied, throwing in a formal salute.

His example was followed by the rest of the line, as if they were only now remembering they were in front of a queen.

"Sergeant Alvar, report," I ordered.

"At least two hundred ghouls and a tenth of mages, ma'am," the orc said. "Ghouls came out first, to draw fire from our mages and crossbows, then the skeletons popped out to lob fireballs and rot curses at the palisade. The Grey Pilgrim popped up to smash them, though, took barely a moment."

My eyes narrowed. Had Keter narrowed in on here being the weak point of my defences, then? Ten mages wasn't a large amount, in the greater scheme of things, but the generals of the Kingdom of the Dead were not usually prone to tossing their like into the grinder without purpose. Mages were a lot harder for the Dead King to get his hands on than footmen, and in some ways they formed the backbone of his armies.

"How'd the palisade hold up?" I asked.

"Our sappers say the wardstones dulled the curses but the fireballs scorched the wood some," Sergeant Alvar said. "If this place weren't so wet the wood might have caught fire."

"Lucky us I picked this miserable hole to fight in, then," I drily said. "We've got swamp water enough to drown the work of a hundred mages."

"Wouldn't mind fighting on a sunny Free Cities beach one of these days, ma'am," a soldier called out. "Just saying."

"You and me both, soldier," I snorted. "But if the Enemy was smart enough to head there, wouldn't it be smart enough to avoid fighting us in the first place?"

That got a few appreciative laughs along with blades on shields. Bravado was always a hit with my rank and file, and it wasn't like they'd not earned the right to brag. What other army of our age could boast campaigns to match those of my Army of Callow? I clapped Sergeant Alvar's shoulder and sent the soldiers back to their duty, as from the corner of my eye I saw that Tariq was done healing my captain. Good, hadn't wanted to get in the way of that. If the man could get treatment from the finest living wielder of Light instead of one of our own priests, far be it from me to spoil that. Fine healers as the priests of the House Insurgent were, they weren't the Peregrine.

It wasn't a long walk, even hobbling, and I wasted no time. When the freshly-healed captain began to head my way I shook my head, having already gotten as much of a report as I needed to. Tariq didn't even look like he was out of breath, ever spry for his lengthening age. I broke the silence first.

"My thanks for healing my people," I acknowledged.

"Would that I could do more," the Pilgrim said.

In most people I would have called it a courtesy, a formula, but when it came to the old man I suspected it was entirely sincere.

"The tide's pulling in," I said. "Our foe took the bait."

"So I've heard," Tariq murmured. "Scourges, too?"

"Drake and Mantle," I said. "But there'll be more Revenants."

There always were.

"More of the Scourges as well," the old man said. "A third to round them out, that is the Enemy's way. Varlet or the Archmage."

Right, heroes insisted on calling Tumult the 'Archmage', as if that description didn't also fit quite a few of our own finest practitioners. I'd grant them that the Revenant in question had an uncannily broad arsenal of sorcery to call on, but his particular fondness for large-scale workings that caused chaos in the ranks meant my own people's name for him seem more apt in my eyes.

"I'd say we've seen no sign of Varlet," I sighed, "but that's rather the point with that one, isn't it?"

The Thief of Star had been like Vivienne back in the day, befitting the common root of their Name: unnaturally skilled in stealth and infiltration, but not all that difficult to deal with in an open fight. The Varlet, as we called that grey-cloaked thing, had clearly been more on the assassin end of the sneaky Named scale. It would have been a fucking headache to deal with even if it *didn't* drench everything it used in particularly lethal poisons. At least we shouldn't be dealing with the Hawk anytime soon. After she'd handily lost an archer's duel against Indrani the Dead King had sent her out east instead, to be Rozala Malanza's headache instead of mine.

"They will come for you, Queen Catherine," Tariq quietly said. "You have become one of the keystones of the Grand Alliance, since the Peace of Salia. Your death would damage it deeply."

"They always come," I shrugged. "I yet draw breath anyway, and I'll not tremble at the shadow of dead Named."

"I meant no offence," the Pilgrim said, "only that wherever you make your stand, foes will be drawn."

"I planned with that in mind," I assured him. "Which brings me to a request."

"I'm listening, Black Queen, though I make no promises," the old man said, faintly smiling.

I somehow got the impression he was having a laugh at my expense, though I couldn't quite pinpoint how.

"I want you to stay here, during the battle," I said. "I know you like to wander and that the real blow might just fall elsewhere in our defences, but your presence would anchor this flank."

"In matters of war, I am at your disposal," Tariq frankly said. "I have never led armies, while your skill in such endeavours is well-known."

I nodded my thanks, but before I could speak I caught movement from the corner of my eye. *Ah*, I thought. *Timing's about right I suppose*. A dark-haired young woman hastily made her way up the ramp, the skeletal hand she wore as a pin revealing her rank among the phalanges, and with a relieved expression pressed a steaming mug of herbal tea into my hands.

"Just in time," I smiled as she bowed. "Thank you."

The Grey Pilgrim cast me a look that did not know whether it wanted to be impressed or disbelieving.

"Always one step ahead, Tariq," I lied, and sipped at my tea.

The dead had begun massing in significant numbers halfway past Morning Bell.

Skirmishes had kept happening along our defence lines – mostly the Boot and the palisade so far – even as I sat in on a meeting of the Second Army's general staff, letting the well-oiled machinery that General Hune had turned them into go through the necessary motions. The Second was my force that'd stayed closest to the original mould of the Legions of Terror, both because of Hune's personal leanings and because a lot of its high officers were originally from the Legions of Terror. And not the Fifteenth, which had come up with me, but those legions that'd joined me after the Folly. The rank and file were much like that of other hosts in my service, a backbone of legionaries bolstered by larger numbers of Callowan recruits, but the culture among the officers here was still very much that of the Legions. It was at once familiar and discomfoting, like seeing an old friend in a nephew's face.

Indrani helped me put my armour on, something that still felt half-wrong. I'd likely never return two wearing full plate, much as I occasionally wished I could, but I'd managed to strike a balance between protection on compromise. Over an aketon I kept to a cuirass and upper vambraces, with a long tasset and a pair of good greaves. An open-face barbute with slightly gilding evoking a crown over my brow finished the set, without even a gorget to link the breastplate and the helm. Any more weight than what I wore and my limp would start becoming a hindrance. The Mantle of Woe closed over my shoulders, hood down and with an affectionate kiss on the side of the neck Archer left me to my duties while departing for hers.

A bare hour before Morning Bell, under bleary morning light, the dead began their advance. I'd drifted towards the miraculous wall built by my sappers on the shores of the Boot so that I might have a better look at the enemy's offensive, and the walkway there did not disappoint. Wherever the water was low and mud shallow, skeletons in arms could be glimpsed marching through the mire. Where the bottom was deeper sometimes all that could be seen was the tip of spears and helms, dragged forward against the muck. The attack came in three prongs, I saw the advance continued. The largest of the forces was coming for the Boot, straight at us, but another was headed south towards the palisade.

The third looked ready to skim the 'sole' of the Boot so it could dip down into the shallows between the peninsula and the northern shoreline, which had me grimacing. Our fort there was finished but I'd been hoping the roundabout route to there would convince the enemy to focus their efforts on the better-defended Boot instead. The enemy general was not unskilled, then. Still, I saw no reason to leave my position at the moment. With the Pilgrim

bolstering the palisade and the Blessed Artificer at the fort, or flanks should be solidly anchored for now. It was only when the opposition got serious about cracking our defences that the real trouble would start.

"Ma'am, it looks like the enemy's in range of our mages."

I glanced at the captain addressing me, a young woman by the name of Jules Farrier – no relation to the man who'd once been the commander of my Gallowborne, I'd asked – and cocked an eyebrow.

"It's your command, captain," I said. "I'm only here to keep an eye on things. The order's yours to give."

"Yes ma'am," she stiffly replied.

I left her to it, eyes still on the dead approaching through the swamp. Captain Farrier had been right, now that the skeletons were reaching swamplands where the depth left their upper body visible it was time for the fireballs to begin. All along the baked brick wall that Pickler had raised, incantations rose and fire bloomed. It was a work of art, the fireball formula that the War College taught. Masego liked to rag on in, but he was coming at it from the wrong direction. He saw one spell being used for a variety of purposes improperly when he knew a spare formula more apt to each purpose, but then he was the Warlock's son. The former Apprentice. Even among highborn mages, nine tenths would not get an education to equal his. The Legion formula was, on the other hand, simple enough that every mage in the service could learn it yet flexible enough that it could be adapted to dozens of different situations. Fighting skeletons, fire itself was only of limited use. Scorching bone and armour accomplished little.

Yet the formula could be tinkered with so that the fireball grew dense, the impact more powerful, and *that* made a dent into the Bones.

Like a wave of fire the spells went out, smashing into the skeletons and splashing into the scum water with hissing vapour. The enemy's advance staggered, but we had too few mages and there were too many enemies: they could not be stopped like this, only slowed. It was still enough to set up a good killing field for our siege engines, our copperstone ballistas beginning measured fire into clumps of skeletons. Given how many undead we'd be facing before day's end, we couldn't afford to just shoot at every shadow.

It would have been easy to see the casualties mount on the enemy side without them even getting close enough to swing at our walls and take it as the herald of overwhelming victory. I knew better. For one, it was telling that even in such small numbers – there couldn't be more than three thousand divided between the three offensive – we couldn't outright dam the tide. More and more

skeletons were slipping through our fire with every heartbeat, coming ever closer to the walls. But beyond that I knew well that in war there were precious few absolute advantages, mostly comparative ones. Our advantage here and now, the walls and the terrain and the preparations, they weren't something to sneer at.

But they were needed to make up for the overwhelming numbers and tirelessness of our enemy in the first place, to make this battle more than a ceremonious suicide, so those initial beats of the battle when our advantages came into play and the enemy's hadn't weren't to be counted on. This was going to get ugly when the bolts ran out, when the magics fizzled and my people were exhausted from hours of hard fighting. Anything before that was just our attempt to inflict enough damage on the enemy we got to survive the hard part. By either luck or fate, the first skeleton to make it to the bottom of our wall started scaling it not even a foot to my left. Liming to the edge of the rampart, I pointed my staff downwards and offered a rueful smile.

"Bad luck," I told it, and let loose with Night.

—

It was mostly luck that I was in the fort when the attack hit.

The fighting at the walls had remained steady but the peril was not great: between the concentration of mages and the rotations of fresh soldiers, we were keeping the dead at bay handily. I'd gotten a report that it'd been trickier at the palisade, but between a company of heavies being brought out and the Grey Pilgrim intervening they'd kept it under control. The assault from the shallows had been comparatively easier, the numbers of the attackers having been thinned by fire from the Boot before they got there. It was the sole front where I'd never gone, though, so I'd elected to have a look. More for morale purposes than because the fight needed me, but morale would count for quite a bit in the coming hours.

The fort itself was of classical Legion layout, square with a forward palisade and a bastion deeper in. Gates on four sides so that legionaries could quickly deploy and in our case two smaller barricades had been added on the sides so that scorpions could be raised on heights and pointed at the shallows. There was some fighting on the shores when I stepped out of a gate within the fort, but nothing all that threatening — the dead were just keeping up the pressure by tossing corpses at our shield wall defending the shore. The Blessed Artificer had stepped in to bring down a great lightning strike of Light at enemy mages, but not involved herself since. I could only approve, given the finite nature of what she could contribute to a fight, and told her as much.

"It seems callous not to use all that I can," Adanna of Smyrna admitted. "There have been deaths, and some of these I might have prevented."

My opinion of her character went up a notch.

"They know the risks of their trade," I replied, not hiding my pride. "They're Army of Callow, they understand sometimes you have to bleed early to win the fight."

The dark-skinned heroine looked unconvinced, but not even her remarkable amount of gall would allow her to argue with a queen about her own soldiers.

"If you sa-"

Her answer was interrupted by crashes and shouts coming from the shoreline, both our heads whipping about. I couldn't see it all from where I stood, even with the front gates open, but I could see that some sort of large snake construct had just emerged from the shallows and was now unhinging its jaw.

"Later," I cut in, already limping forward.

Legionaries parted for me as I made my way out of the fort, even when they were hurrying out as reinforcements, and I hastened to take a better look. I cursed in Kharsum. A new kind of construct, by the looks of it: much smaller than the great snakes used in the sieges of Twilight's Pass, but built along the same lines. More a carrier of troops and battering ram than anything else, but no less dangerous for it. Half a dozen had hit the beaches simultaneously and were now pouring out skeletons into the gaps of my shield wall. *These were made for the swamps of Hainaut*, I thought. An answer to both the difficulties of the terrain and our growing advantage at range. We hadn't been the only ones to prepare for this campaign.

"Hazaak," the Blessed Artificer snarled, raising a short copper spear.

She'd caught up to me without my even noticing. Not to be outdone, I drew deep on Night even as Light bloomed around the short spear. Where the Artificer struck with burning might, a great crackling spear of roiling Light falling on one of the snakes, I instead took a more measured approach: shadows slithered along the ground and suddenly thrust up, threading through the open maws of three of the constructs and forcefully snapping them shut.

"Priests, on the three bound," I calmly said, pitching my voice so it'd be heard.

The House Insurgent dutifully obeyed, Light begin to tear at the wiggling great snakes in sharp spears even as Adanna reached for another of her instruments. I began to shape a great ball of blackflame so ram down the maw of one of the remaining snakes when I caught sight of flicker of movement to my left. Instinct had me redirecting my fire there and I caught the Revenant in the stomach, scorching its thin frame as it stumbled on the ground. It looked like any other Bone, little more than a corpse in ancient armour, but none of those would have withstood the quantity of blackflame I'd just tossed at it.

"Revenant," I noted. "Won't be the only one."

Already I was weaving a follow-up, threads binding the legs of the down Revenant together as I prepared a larger mass of blackflame above its body – which exploded, a curse tearing through them.

"Mantle," I snarled, eyes flitting about.

I found her in the water, only the upper half of her armoured form above the mire. The dull, black plate steel plate set with emeralds and silver inscriptions couldn't be confused for anyone else, not the thick green cloak whose hood obscured the visor of her helm. Another snake went up in a pillar of white flames, the Artificer striking without hesitation, but during my heartbeat of distraction the Revenant on the ground had broken its bonds. With surprising fluidity it struck out at the heroine, shortsword arcing for her neck, but my hand was steady and my aim true – my own blade caught it in time, an inch from biting into Adanna's unprotected flesh.

Gods, would it kill the woman to wear some fucking armour?

"I will take the fallen priestess," the Blessed Artificer mildly said. "I take offence the use her powers have found."

"Be my guest," I grinned. "I'll handle our little friend here."

The Revenant withdrew its blade and took a step back, but it'd forgotten this wasn't a duel and it was behind my godsdamned lines: two big orc heavies smashed into its back with their greatshields, making it stumble, and I took the opening. I struck high and in a heavy chop, which it caught with its blade and deftly slid so my momentum dragged me into its guard, but before it could rotate its wrist and disarm me my deadwood staff smashed into the side of its head. Though beyond paid it still stumbled, and with a grunt I drew back my blade to strike again – weaving Night along the length. With a clean cut I sent its helmeted head rolling, even as Adanna was wreathed with blinding light.

I shielded my eyes with my hood, offering a grin to the two heavies that'd come to help.

"This one counts as half-yours," I told them. "Tell your lieutenant you're up for commendation."

Both grinned back like big ugly green cats, returning enthusiastic calls of *Warlord*, but even as I bumped shoulders against them in a friendly manner I was already taking in the few bits of fighting I'd missed. Mantle had ripped up my working on the snakes, though I'd been too distracted to noticed, but the fight with the Artificer wasn't going well for her at all. She'd already been forced to pull out a globe of smooth, mirror-like darkness I'd only ever seen her use when hard pressed. Meanwhile, between the Artificer and the House Insurgent there were only to great snakes left and the mages were focusing their efforts on plugging the breaches so that the heavies could fill them. With a triumphant cry Adanna crushed a glass baton in her fist and a rain of Light spears fell on the globe of darkness, shattering it with a keening scream. Under it there was no trace of Mantle, who must have legged it when the attack began going south.

I glanced at the Blessed Artificer appreciatively.

"You're definitely worth keeping around," I said. "She's a tricky opponent, for me."

Adanna of Smyrna straightened proudly.

"It is my duty to—"

In the distance, to the south, a few goutts of red went up. Signal spells, asking for reinforcements. *Shit, they must have hit the palisade as well.*

"Later," I amusedly told the Artificer, opening a gate and stepping through it.

—

The first thing I heard stepping out of the Twilight Ways had an involuntary shiver going up my spine.

"**Shine,**" the Grey Pilgrim coldly said.

I shielded my eyes with the flat of my blade, but not quite quickly enough the terrifyingly bright light I glimpsed did not blind me. I cursed, head ringing and eyes burning, and almost stumbled into a soldier. I must have come out near a formation. It was too long for comfort before I could see again, but when I did what my restored vision showed was a mixed bag. On one hand, there was a gaping hole in the palisade about ten feet wide. Broken logs had been brought forward to plug it, but the undead were trying to push through the opening and only narrowly being held back by a hasty shield wall. On the other hand, the smoking

skeleton at Tariq's feet that was still holding a familiar claymore could not be anything but the Drake.

It looked like getting a blast of the Peregrine's most powerful aspect from up close was too much for even that monster's regeneration to take, because while some specks of flesh were reappearing on the bones it was nothing more than that.

"Your Majesty," Tariq mildly greeted me. "If you would handle the breach, I am not yet finished with this one."

"Hey, I'm not one to argue with a smoking corpse," I shrugged as I began to gather Night. "Do as you will."

I was in no way inclined to keep to subtle means when dealing with an outright breach, so this time I simply began to gather a few dozen great balls of blackflame above the undead trying to mash through my shield wall. Impatiently I struck at the ground with my staff, the balls smashing downwards and exploding in great gouts of black fire. Immediately the pressure slackened and my soldiers pushed the enemy back, enough that sappers were able to bring out panels and began repairing the breach. I tossed another great gout of fire at the dead to push them back in the water long enough for the holes to be plugged, then let the captains in charge to handle the rest. I glanced at Tariq, who'd nailed the remains of the Drake to the ground with nails of Light and was now opening a gate into the Twilight Ways beneath him. That might actually do the trick, I mentally conceded. A sudden contortion had the skeleton's skull snap upwards and something that glinted in the light flew. A tooth?

I immediately wove Night to catch it, even as Tariq kicked the skeleton into Twilight and the bones turned to dust, but someone else beat me to it. One of my soldiers, a young man who grinned at his own swift reflexes. He twitched, a heartbeat later.

"No," I snarled.

The soldier smirked at me and winked, then ran for it. I sent a javelin of Night into the back of his knee, my soldiers crying out in dismay at the sight of one of theirs getting shot in the back. But though the soldiers stumbled the shredded flesh grew back in a heartbeat. The Pilgrim's beam of Light incinerated armour and muscle alike, but it wasn't enough. Still burning with pale flames as he deftly avoided the Night harpoon I threw at his back, the reborn Drake threw himself over the edge of the palisade and into the mass of undead. I went up the ramp and took out my anger on the undead in a storm of black flames, but the bastard was in the wind. Again. My fingers clenched around my staff until the knuckles went white.

My soldiers gave me a wide berth, but Tariq was less wary of the dark mood laid bare on my face.

"It's not the last of him we'll see today," the Grey Pilgrim simply said. "And we know the trick, now."

I made myself breathe out, reaching for calm, and looked up at the sky. The sun had risen higher than I'd expected, we must be close to Noon Bell by now. Gods, barely noon and the fighting was likely to last until dark. Above the Boot, streaks of yellow went up. *Constructs sighted*. I squared my shoulders.

"Next time," I agreed, and opened a gate.

As always, there was to be no rest for the wicked.

Chapter 68: Opposition

"No matter how long you glare at the sun, it will not blink first."

– Taghreb saying

I missed using a shield.

It didn't really fit with my fighting style anymore – digging in when you had a bad leg was a good way to trip and stumble into a very stupid death – but there'd been something both comforting and satisfying about having a large slab of metal to put between myself and the enemy. Now I had to keep my eye on the enemy at all times, to gauge and parry and manoeuvre without rest. Just taking the hit and then smashing my foes had been both simpler and, honesty compelled me to admit, viscerally satisfying in a way that all this finesse and calculation wasn't. I knew a thing or two about pulling strings, these days, but I suspected that deep down it was the lessons of the Pit that'd always stay engraved in bones: blood and sinew, the vicious satisfaction of just *decking someone in the face*.

Still, it felt good to engage sword in hand. I slapped aside the skeleton's blow – strong but slow, and so very predictable – and smashed its bare skull with the pommel of my sword, a shiver of Night accompanying the crack of bone breaking. The necromancy keeping it animate broke and the pile of bones collapsed, leaving me free to cast a glance around. The enemy had successfully scaled the wall in the centre stretch after making a ramp out of dead, wet ghouls that fireballs couldn't touch but the other two attempts at the extremities of the Boot's 'sole' had failed when the Light of House Insurgent incinerated the attempts in a way that magefire could not.

Now even here, where we'd been taken by surprise, the last of the dead were being put down as I watched. It'd not been a major setback, all in all, with perhaps only two hundred skeletons and ghouls making it up here before they were surrounded and

contained, but it'd had the potential to turn dangerous. If the enemy had kept pouring troops there, it could have turned into a beachhead. Yet I found, even as my soldiers began to cheer our temporary victory, that my heart did not lift. My eyes remained on the silhouettes in the distance, the utterly still ranks of the dead standing just outside of the range of our ballistas.

Even though this had been a weak foothold, and made in a place where my army would have rather sharp teeth in its counterattack – our defences were geared around holding the peninsula first and foremost, since we'd known it would likely face the worst of the assaults – it *had* been a foothold. The first the enemy had managed to keep since they'd begun their attacks this morning. Yet the enemy general had not reinforced his attacking force after sending that first wave of three thousand or so, leaving the three prongs to fail and be wiped out. Most of the enemy army had never engaged, and was watching us in silence even now. Waiting, patient as only the soldiers of the grave could be.

"What are you up to now?" I murmured, leaning against my staff.

The general I was facing this time was canny in the way that the intelligence behind the Second Battle of Lauzon's Hollow hadn't been. That thing with the ghouls ramps? It'd been an adaptation to the fact that, as long as Archer had unravellers to use as arrows, she was a hard counter to Keter's usual tactic of using large constructs as siege ramps and troop transports. The artefacts were too precious to be used on ghouls, especially when they were being used by the hundreds here. In fact the only constructs we'd seen used so far had been the great snakes that'd beached near the fort, and those had stayed under the water until the very last moment.

We are being tested, I thought, eyes watching the rows of the dead. Three thousand of the most expendable among the undead gathering to face us as Maillac's Boot had just been tossed at my defences like scraps off a plate, just to test the strengths and weakness of our arrangements. *And you sent a handful of a Revenants out*, I then thought, *to probe what kind of Named there are on our side too*. It was a good thing, I grimly thought, that I'd always intended to keep Masego and Akua back as long as possible. Even just the awareness of their presence might have been enough to forewarn my enemy some.

The cheers washed over me and I painted a smile on my face, raising my sword in victory to roars of approval, but the joy did not reach my eyes. I wasn't so sure we'd truly gotten the better out of this round, not in the way that mattered, and that unsettled me. Still, I could hardly bemoan about what looked like a win to most of my soldiers. I went around and gave praise and encouragement where they should go, limping along the rampart to harden the spine of my soldiers before the next assault. Time

passed and the sun kept rising in the sky, the hour slowly edging away from Morning Bell and towards Noon Bell, and though the quiet on the fronts was pleasing to my soldier it had dread slowly settling in my stomach.

We'd been seen through.

Under the excuse of having a drink of water – the sun was hammering down hard, and we were all baking in our helmets – I left the wall and settled further in, having discreetly sent for General Hune. I stood in the shadow cast by the ogre, pulling at a canteen, and wiped my mouth as I nodded back to her greetings.

"They're not attacking," I bluntly said.

I wasn't saying anything she or anyone with eyes didn't already know, but the two of us knew the danger represented by that sentence. We'd been counting on our enemy hitting us as soon as it could assemble a wave, trying to grind us down through constant battle, but instead the opposition had called a halt after a single major assault.

"They must be waiting for the second wave to arrive," General Hune said. "That complicates matters, Your Majesty."

It fucking well did. For one, we wouldn't be dealing with twenty thousand undead and then later that day thirty – or perhaps even forty – thousand more. The opposition was gathering for a single sweep, an overwhelming wave. That was... problematic. It wasn't like we'd not considered the possibility that the enemy would try to besiege us instead of battle on our terms, but we'd never meant to actually stay here long enough for it to be an issue. The plan had been to break the first two waves and then evacuate before the third could arrive, using the pharos device to open a large enough amount of gates for it to be feasible, but this changed things. The moment we actually used the device, now, *then* the enemy would begin its attack. Whoever the leading commander on the other side was, they'd clearly grasped the core weakness of my position: an evacuation through the Twilight Ways when under assault meant that at least my rearguard was going to get slaughtered.

Facing fifty thousand dead, though, and all the horrors Keter had to unleash? Shit, we'd maybe lose a third of the ten thousand soldiers of the Second Army on our way out. There'd be a point in the battle where three thousand or so soldiers would be trying to squeeze through the gates while surrounded on all sides and without the support of the rest of the army. Juniper had run war games, and when that tipping point was reached what ensued was... grim, to say the least. *Fuck*. If the dead had been intending on standing there and doing nothing as we left I would have waved them on my way out and called it a day, but there was no way they'd be willing to do me that favour.

"Your opinion?" I asked.

"We must prepare for a fighting retreat into the ways and use the pharos device the moment our forces are in place," General Hune replied without hesitation. "Within the hour at most. The second wave will begin arriving soon, and it will only get worse from there."

I hummed noncommittally. I got from her words that the ogre general was seeing this as a choice needing to be made between two fighting retreats: one begun now, while the enemy was not yet fully gathered, or one begun later when it had. There would be no extracting ourselves from this without losing a few fingers. Much as I did not like to consider it, I honestly wasn't sure she was wrong. We'd made plans for the enemy showing restraint, so it wasn't like we were going into this blind – officers had been briefed, we'd even planned out which parts of the defences should be abandoned first – but we'd never really considered that the enemy would just toss three thousand expendables at us and then just... stand there.

Even our worst case had the enemy pulling out after effective losses of half its number, choosing to bolster the second wave rather than waste the rest of its numbers on a fruitless assault.

"We could attempt to break out towards the east," I finally said.

"I will obey that order if it is given," General Hune blandly replied.

I cocked an eyebrow.

"But," I said, invitation implicit.

"It is my opinion that we would find ourselves in the same situation as now in a day, only without the fortifications and retreat plan," Hune said. "Even going on the offensive and attempting to smash the first wave before the second arrives would be a superior option, to my eye. We would incur losses, but should we then retreat to our fortifications our original plan could then be resumed, if at a disadvantage."

I grimaced. Taking a swing at the dead in the swamp wasn't really something I wanted to do unless there was no other option: the undead would be better at fighting in the muck, and it wasn't like Keter had even been shy about poisoning water. No, an attack of my infantry into that mire was a dead end. And yet I had some difficulty resigning myself to making a decision that would be, in essence, writing off a third of the Second Army. The thought had me clenching my fingers, even though the cold thing that lay at the heart of me knew that I'd give the order if I had to, but I would not bend my neck to this ending before first attempting otherwise.

"We'll attempt to force them into an attack first," I said. "My people have been working on a project that might leave them no other option – and even if they manage to withstand it, we'll first be able to thin the herd before retreating."

General Hune's eyes narrowed.

"Then Your Majesty agrees that a retreat is in order," she said.

"I do," I admitted. "And you'll need to inform your officer cadres we might be headed there. But first I want to see if the dead can be strong-armed into wasting themselves on our walls."

"And might you do that?" the ogre skeptically asked.

"By making it clear it's the least wasteful option left to them," I replied with a hard smile.

It was time to for Masego to come out.

—

"I've not managed to increase the effective range," Hierophant admitted, "not laterally, at least."

"Which still leaves vertically," I grunted. "If the Summoner makes a flying beast and we strap your platform to the back, can you cast?"

He mulled over that for a moment.

"Yes," Masego finally said. "I cannot promise the same degree of precision that the solid ground would allow for, however."

"If there's one good thing about our situation, Zeze," I said, "it's that even if you miss, you'll hit."

"That sounds like a blatant logical contradiction," he noted, "but I will take your word for it."

"Kind of you," I drily replied. "I'll be handling the Summoner, so ready your affairs and wait for us on the Boot."

The Summoner's reaction to the order was mixed: on one hand, he had cowardly tendencies and preferred not to put himself in great danger. It'd already spread through the ranks that some of the Scourges were here. On the other hand, I'd made it clear that this was a crucial task I'd attend to as well and that'd flattered his self-importance. Still, there was no arguing with a direct order from me when it came to battlefield affairs. The wyvern-construct still had that unearthly glow, but it looked much more sharply defined now. I could make out the shift of muscles when it moved, and there was an animal cunning in its

eyes. It was also smart enough to be terrified of Hierophant, which was plain good sense.

The Summoner had warned me that it might get unruly when Masego tied a flat circular stone atop its back, but instead the construct did not dare move a muscle. It behaved around Hierophant the same way a deer would around a lion – frozen and hoping the predator wasn't hungry today. We took flight without much fanfare, to sparse cheers from my soldiers. I wove an anchor for my feet on the wyvern's back and added a transparent bubble to shield me from the winds. The Summoner led us towards the enemy ranks, as I'd asked him to, but stayed high in the sky. We'd yet to see buzzards in the area so our flight was not contested, though I doubted that would last forever.

We circled slowly atop the front ranks of the enemy, Masego wresting magic from a few spare artifacts so he might steady himself atop the circular stone. A bubble rather similar to mine formed around him, and I shouted for the Summoner to halt the construct's flight and make it stay in place. Long, deft fingers began to trace runes in the air as I risked a glance downwards. The dead were splayed out for what must have been the better part of a mile but none were paying attention to us at the moment. Safety through heights? It was true that without buzzards around Keter would find it hard to contest our presence up here. We were high up enough that neither arrows nor javelins were a worry, and magic would be seen long before it became a threat.

"Abyss and firmament," the Hierophant said, and though his voice was quiet it *rippled*. "I take the shape of the star and the depth of the pit, borrowing laws high and low."

Below us, moving as a single entity, seventeen thousand undead heads turned to gaze up at us.

"That can't be good," I muttered.

"I have woven curses into hymn, stuffed a heart with straw," the Hierophant called out, voiced cadenced. "That which is hollow I have raised onto the dais, revered as glorious under three skies and revered by nine corners."

From below a tide of darkness rose, but I realized after a heartbeat that it was not a ritual. It was a few thousand curses, thrown at us together from as many hands. I clenched my staff closely, hoping to the Hells that Masego was done with that incantation soon.

"Behold," the Hierophant said.

I winced, covering my ears at the horrid grind that lay behind the word. The Sisters murmured uneasily in the back of my mind.

"Behold," the Hierophant said, "all ye with eyes, for I have made a god of clay and it is an idol of **wrath**."

The sky screamed. There was no other word for it. The air wavered and shrieked and twisted, an alien gleam filling my vision as I pulled down my hood to shield my eyes. As if a god had breathed out in front of us, the wyvern banked wildly and had to struggle not to fall – the Summoner screamed, voice shrilly – but after less than a heartbeat the pressure was all gone. I first glimpsed Masego, panting as he stood surrounded by fading runes, and only after making sure he was fine did I glance down. *Gods*, I thought. There was a smoking crater in the swamp, maybe a hundred feet wide, and though water was streaking back in it looked like the... smite had baked the very mud. How many undead had been vaporized with that, I wondered. Two, three hundred? Likely more, and a great wave was going through the swamp that toppled more than a few soldiers. Of the curses that had been rising to hit us, there was no trace. Much like, I thought, a child throwing a pebble into the path of falling mountain would not be able to pick it out afterwards.

"Can you do that again?" I asked, tone calm.

"I believe so," Masego noted. "Though not many times."

"Then do it," I ordered with a hard smile.

Power began to gather again, and below us I found exactly what I'd wanted: advancing as one, the dead were headed towards the Second Army. *Decisive*, I silently praised the enemy general. The moment they'd realized that it was possible we'd just stay up here and hammer them into nothing, they'd abandoned the notion of sieging my army and begun to close the distance. If the dead were too close to my own troops, after all, it'd be risky to keep using this. Still, they weren't out of the woods yet. I wove Night over my ears and dug my feet in, as Masego's voice swelled in incantation again, wondering how many shots we'd get in before he was too exhausted to continue.

The answer, as it turned out, was six.

It didn't matter, as by then the enemy was committed to an assault on all our defences and all that pulling out would accomplish was allow us to smash the undead army as it retreated. We flew back to the Boot, and though I was wary the whole way back there was no ambush. Bo buzzards came out of nowhere, no Revenants were tossed up in the sky. It made sense, I admitted to myself, since we weren't fighting a field army here so much as a bunch of warbands and marching columns tossed in our direction when we popped out. I supposed it was a testament to how fucking unpleasant of an adversary the Dead King was that even when luck allowed us to get one over him I still ended up unsure it wasn't a ploy on his part.

"Your service in this campaign has been exemplary," I told the Summoner after he dismissed his wyvern.

Much as I disliked the man personally, he'd ended up consistently useful. Being unpleasant didn't mean he shouldn't get praised, just that it'd irk me to dole it out.

"I am pleased to have my worth recognized by my queen," the Summoner replied, smirking. "I hope to continue to be of service after these trifles, of course."

My eyes narrowed. The little shit had been born and raised and Procer, as far as I knew, but he had been insisting he was Callowan for some time. The offer of 'continued service' was pretty straightforward, meaning he wanted to settle in Callow after the war and probably expected a lordship to be tacked on to sweeten the deal. Considering he wasn't all that difficult to deal with and his ambitions seemed relatively limited, I wasn't necessarily opposed to that. So long as it was a court title with no lands attached. Mind you, that wasn't my decision alone to make. I wasn't foisting him off on Vivienne without giving her a say in the matter.

"I look forward to it," I mildly said, "and will pass along your sentiments to Lady Dartwick."

"It would be an honour," the Summoner said, "to make her acquaintance."

Yeah, that one definitely wanted to settle in Callow after the war. I wasn't sure I could blame him, considering short of Praes it'd probably end up one of the nations that least minded villains. So long as he stayed loyal to crown and country, it was not an inaccurate assessment for him to figure he'd not only be tolerated but actively protected. If he was loyal then he would be considered as an asset, and Vivienne was of a practical bent when it came to protecting Callowan interests. Some of the decisions I had made she would not ever repeat, but that did not mean she was naïve – just that she was not as good as ignoring the whispers of her conscience.

I escorted Masego to a healer's tent so he might rest, ignoring his protests, and only then went to join the battle. His exhaustion was not a threat to his health, but the healers were unlikely to let him out of a bed in his state and Zeze's fathers had drilled into him the paramount importance of not ignoring what your healer told you. It'd been with the addendum that priests were fumbling ignorant cheats and this rule mostly applied to mage healers, but I liked to think the years had mostly weaned Masego out of that instilled disdain.

There was no lack of enemies for me to fight anywhere along the defensive lines, but it was on the Boot that I stayed. Even as

swarms of skeletons and ghouls assaulted the walls and my soldiers stubbornly held on the walls, retreating only when officers pulled on their whistles and fresh troops were rotated in, I smothered a smile. This was hard fighting, but it was also a victory of sorts: the enemy and I had stared each other down across this swamp, and with Masego's help it had been the enemy that blinked first. Now it was bleeding away its strength failing to take our walls, and though it was not without casualties on our side the advantage was decisively ours.

For every soldier we lost they lost four, and our wounded weren't left to die – they were pulled back, brought to the healer tents. I moved along the wall, sticking to wherever the fight was hardest, and through thrice the enemy earned a foothold atop the wall thrice that foothold was clawed back. As the time passed, though, the lack of Revenants entering the fray began to weigh on me. The opposing general was keeping its trump cards away from us, unwilling to risk them before what was likely to be the decisive stretch: the assault of the second wave. Still, this round went well for us. When it became undeniable than any more lingering would lead to a complete wipeout the enemy broke away, limping back into the swamps under the fire of our mages and the House Insurgent.

I headed towards my general's tent when the last of the dead walked out of range, intent on hearing casualty reports. Though the official reports were still incomplete, Hune already had estimates when I found her: at least five hundred dead and seven hundred wounded. Even for a well-prepared defensive action, I found the numbers astonishing and told her as much. Her general staff preened, but she was unmoved.

"It is only initial reports, Your Majesty," General Hune said. "We will see if the real figures remain so flattering."

"I expect they will," I said. "The Second Army had yet to fail a single expectation I set out for it."

Not that I'd set out many, but a little praise could go a long way. Officers gossiped with officers, and that gossip had a way of trickling down to the ranks. After that, though, I headed to my own tent. I'd been fighting sporadically since early morning and drawing on Night regularly, so I was damn exhausted. Since Archer was keeping an eye out for necromantic constructs, still on her perch, it was one of the phalanges that helped me out of my armour. It was now almost an hour past Noon Bell, I learned, and I recalled that we believed the second wave would begin arriving slightly before Afternoon Bell. That still left me at least an hour and change to nap, which I hoped would refresh me when the next round of fighting came.

Gods knew that my leg ached like a bloody wound, at the moment, and staying on my feet would only make it worse. I crawled into

bed with strict instructions to wake me if there was another assault, but otherwise leave me to my slumber for at least an hour. Clutching a blanket, I spent the first few moments wondering what my enemy's plan were and if I would find sleep at all, but before I knew it exhaustion had triumphed over worry: I fell into a deep, dark slumber.

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I woke up tasting my sweat against the roof of my mouth, likely stinking all the way up to the Heavens. Most of my affairs were already packed, in deference to the rapidly approaching need to evacuate this place, but there was still a bowl of water for me to rinse myself up a little. It was hardly a wash, but what would be the point? I was headed back into the thick of it anyway, and the afternoon soon would be no more kind than the morning one had been. I'd woken before any of the phalanges could wake me, and found a pair of them standing guard outside my tent.

"I'll need one of you to help me back into my armour," I said. "And reports, meanwhile."

As it turned out, during my hour of sleep I'd missed little. The enemy had pulled back even further than before, and while General Hune believed that the vanguard of the second wave might have begun to arrive early there'd been no way to be sure. Sending scouts into that swamp, even our nimblest goblins, would just be throwing away lives. I decided to speak with Hune before returning to the fronts, to get a read on when she believed we should pull the trigger on the pharos device, and inquired as to her whereabouts as I fastened the Mantle of Woe over my armour.

"She is in her tent, Your Majesty," the young phalange told me. "Speaking with her staff tribune, I believe."

Good, at least I knew the way. Though my limp was not quick it was steady, and with my sword back on my belt I made my way to the tent. I was a mere thirty feet away from it when a splash of red in the sky to the south caught my attention. A signal spell, I thought. An attack on the palisade? An assault would have been seen coming, though, and I would have heard of it. Unless it was a strike by Revenants, I thought, but it seemed a bold and unnecessary gambled on the enemy general's part. Perhaps a force had been snuck out under an obfuscation spell. Regardless, with the Grey Pilgrim there and reinforcements no doubt already on their way I had little to worry about.

Two guards were standing outside of Hune's tent, but their stances were natural. It wasn't that that gave it away. It was the *scent*. I'd known enough battlefields that I would recognize the scent of fresh blood anywhere. Stomach dropping I hurried forward, tapping one of the guards gently with my staff only to see the armoured orc topple – already dead, just propped up to

look as if still alive. The scent of blood was even thicker inside the tent, I smelled as I forced open the flap, but it was my ears that I was relying on and it saved my life. I heard the spin of the throwing knife that should have buried itself in my left eye and hastily ducked down, just in time to see a grey-cloaked figure turn away from me.

The Varlet. I'd recognize the cloak anywhere.

And just as I drew on Night, spinning up a work, I saw the Varlet dance around a blow of the tall, roaring Hune – made silent by some aspect, for all her shouting – and flicker forward to carve open my general's throat.

Chapter 69: Book Draw

"Courage is not a virtue, is it a bridle forced onto fear."

– Stygian saying

It was an almost comical sight until the blood sprayed. Hune was at least twelve feet tall, and even unarmoured she was massive – the Varlet would not have been able to reach her throat without leaping if the ogre hadn't leaned down to strike it. But she had, and the serrated dagger opened her throat before I could do more than draw on Night.

"No," I hissed.

I struck out furiously, a jet black spit of darkness tossed out in a heartbeat, but the Varlet's grey cloak swirled as it slipped behind a stumbling Hune smoothly and used her mass for cover. I had to disperse my own attack, already moving deeper in, but my general screamed hoarsely as the blade bit into her again from behind. Fuck, one poison I might have been able to slow but two? Past subtlety, I wove hooks into the tent's ceiling and ripped the whole thing down on where I believed the Varlet to be. Success, at least for a heartbeat – a shape swallowed up by the canvas and wooden frame struggled to get out, even as Hune fell to her knees. The ogre rasped out a breath, her limbs trembling.

The slit throat would kill her even if the poison didn't, so I began weaving Night into the surrounding flesh to halt the bleeding. Just a time-buying measure, but it was a start. General Hune turned burning eyes towards the shape cutting its way out of the canvas, and in a croaking voice forced out a few words in a tongue I did not know. She choked on blood after that, but whatever it was she'd said it... reverberated. I felt a shiver of power – not Light, not Night, but something... older. Deeper. Like cool and dark water from a lake so deep its bottom had never known the light of day. Even as the Varlet's blade finally cut

its way through the canvas the Revenant was brutally *smashed* into the ground by some invisible force.

Bones cracked and the dagger was shattered, but in the moment that followed Hune's face paled.

"Stop that," I snarled. "It'll kill you before I can-"

Not one to waste time, I laid a hand on her exposed wrist as even when she was on her knees her neck was too high for me to reach. I pushed Night into her veins, looking for the poisons, and within a breath I'd found it. Clenching my teeth, I steadied my stance and grasped the substance tight – I'd have to rip it out, if she was to live. Instead, the moment Night touched the poison the substance erupted. It turned into some sort of virulent acid, and I withdrew my power with a sympathetic scream of pain as I felt the poison hollow her out from the inside. I opened my eyes in time to see the tall ogre spasm violently, once, and her eyes roll up to show the whites. Like a great tree, she toppled forward.

General Hune was dead before she hit the ground.

The Varlet, though smashed, was snapping tits limbs back into place and crawling out of the pile of canvas. Snarling, I formed a ball of blackflame large as a horse and smashed it down onto the Revenant. It would keep, at least for a bit. Instead it was my general I limped towards, feeling sick in my stomach. I'd killed her, trying to meddle with that poison. If I'd held my hand, a healer in sorcery or Light might have attended to her instead and... *Damn me*, I silently swore. *Damn this*. The closest I'd ever come to what I was considering was Warlock seeing to Nauk, and that'd gone wrong in distressing ways. But it was my hand that'd killed Hune Egelsdottir, in the end, and that meant I owed. I drew deep of Night, deeper than was wise with a battle still to be fought, and knelt to lay my hand against the side of the fallen ogre's neck. The last wisps of life were already fading, but the soul would not be far.

"Rise again," I murmured, the power singing in my blood.

It coursed through the large body, muscles twitching, and rose to snatch the soul. I held it, for a moment, and that was enough to draw *attention*. Something unspeakably larger than I found my threads settling around the soul of Hune, and its disapproval was as a physical law. I remembered, dimly, once seeing the ogre kneeling before a bowl on a Callowan field. She'd spoken prayers, and the bowl had emptied. I withdrew the Night, the backlash still shaking my bones, and bowed my head in acknowledgement. My interference here was neither needed nor welcome, for wherever it might be that Hune Egelsdottir was headed she was in favour.

Below, for all its horrors, always paid back its dues in full.

I set aside the torrent of emotions that would only distract me, eyes returning to the Varlet at the exact moment that the grey-cloaked thing emerged from my black flames. It was an artefact, that cloak, which seemed to have a bit of resistance to everything but brute force. The hood was up but in the shadow of it I still glimpsed calm red eyes and an ornate half-mask of jet and silver. There was an air of elegance to it, and to the Varlet's demeanour as well: it moved like a courtier, if a very deadly one. Unfortunately for the Revenant, I was also entirely out of patience with its existence. It produced a long curved knife, though its stance implied it was about to run for it. Not that it mattered.

"There'll be none of that," I coldly said.

In my hand a golden chalice filled with red sand appeared as I drew out an artefact from the Night. I tipped over the sand and the red was caught in the breeze, to seemingly no effect. The Varlet stepped back, just as the first red grain touched the blackflame.

"Surge."

The black fire roared out, exploding in a column that rose high in the sky and swallowing up the Varlet whole. It'd been a warrior's aspect, meant to strengthen a body or a blade temporarily, but the property of strengthening had been rather broad in nature. It'd been the better of the artefacts I got out of the Revenants slain at Second Lauzon, though it was still relatively weak. Still, feeding a stolen aspect into one of the most dangerous uses of Night saw me get my due: the aspect that'd maintained a bubble of silence containing us ended, and I suddenly heard the bustle of hundreds of soldiers converging towards us. I paid them little attention, slowly limping forward.

The Varlet struggled against the flames, trying to slip out, but I made them follow. Leaving my sword sheathed, I idly spun my staff and used the motion to guide the black flame into a tightly-packed sphere that caught the Revenant and lifted it from the ground. I grit my teeth, feeding more power into a working I was finding increasingly difficult to control – the aspect had made the fire wilder somehow, more willful as much as more powerful. A heartbeat later the sphere was... snuffed out, suddenly, as the power of an aspect flared and gutted out. The cloak fluttered down, but when I threw a javelin of Night at it I saw it was empty.

The Varlet landed in front of me, and I finally got a good look at it. Though the corpse was severely burned, there were still a few dark tresses of hair and the remains of an elegant doublet in the scorched ruin I had made of this one. It struck out with yet another knife – straight and thin, a stiletto this time – but I caught its wrist with my free hand. It was stronger, but what did

that matter? Before it could power through and sink the blade into a junction of my armour near the belly, I left my staff to stand and plunged my free hand into his chest. The Revenant twitched, freezing, as I went looking for an aspect to rip out. Three left, I felt.

One that was like an ever-shifting fang, another like utter stillness and the last... a hundred eyes, never blinking? I snatched the fang, hand withdrawing to find my fingers clutching a long wyvern's fang so thoroughly covered with overlapping runes that there was no trace left of the original untouched paleness. **Harm**, I grasped in the same moment I stole it. So long as something drew breath, this aspect would birth something capable of killing it. Endless possibilities flickered through my mind but the Varlet was already drawing back so I simply picked one close to the surface. The fang went back into the Revenant's body with a wet squelch.

It screamed, its ability to impose stillness gone as the poison coating the fang destroyed yet another aspect.

The Revenant flailed at me, which forced me to draw back, and tossed a knife so I ducked in a way that painfully pulled at my bad leg. By the time my gaze went back up, the Varlet was nowhere in sight. Fuck. If I'd been able to choose the aspect I harmed it would have been the eyes, they were the obvious pick of the stealth one, but it'd not been that discriminating a weapon. I smacked the butt of my staff against the ground, Night shivering out as I looked for a trace of the Scourge, but I found nothing. I almost snarled, my anger flaring hot. Another loss, another one I'd known for years gone and what did I have to show for it? I forced myself to breathe out, suddenly aware of the hundreds of soldiers looking at me.

The ranks parted for an officer, a tall dark-skinned woman in her forties with a fleshy face and eyes of a tinge that bordered on amber. She wore her armour like the veteran that she was, and I gave her a jerky nod as she approached.

"Legate Zola," I said, keeping my voice calm.

"Your Majesty," Legate Zola Osei replied, her lightly accented voice pleasant to the ear. "You have avenged our loss."

My eyes went to the unmoving form of Hune, toppled down unceremoniously. We'd never been friends, she and I, and I'd not been blind to the fact that she'd only stayed with me because the ogres wanted someone well-placed in the camp of every possible winner of the conflicts in the east. But she had been with me for a long time, since the start almost, and that... mattered. How many of those were left, these days? With every battle, there were few less.

"No," I grimly replied, "I haven't. But by the day's end, perhaps we will have given her a fitting pyre."

The legate saluted, fist over heart, and to my surprise more than a few of the soldiers around us did the same. My voice must have carried further than I'd expected.

"You have seniority among the Second Army's legates, if I recall correctly," I said.

"I do," Legate Zola quietly replied.

I closed my eyes, breathed out and centred myself. Grief, however complex its nature, could wait until tomorrow.

"Then you have command, General Zola," I said, opening my eyes. "Confirm your replacement legate quickly, and have the announcement sent to all the appropriate officers."

There was no argument. I looked around, and for one dreadful heartbeat I recognized no faces. Some were young, some were old, and they came from places that spanned half of Calernia's length, but there was not one among them that I knew. *I lead an army of strangers*, I thought. And no amount of salutes or cheering could obscure that bitter truth. I mastered the spasm of unease, forcing myself to move so it would not show as much on my face. My eyes drifted down and I caught sight of the Varlet's grey cloak, laying abandoned on the ground.

"Someone take that and throw it into a warded chest," I ordered.

It was sooty and rumpled up, but not broken. If Hierophant found no trap woven into its fabric, I might gift it to Indrani so that at least one smile came out of this fucking horror of a day. I limped away, feeling like screaming. Breathe in, breathe out.

There was still a battle to win.

—

When they came for us again, it was without holding back. There were no tactics to speak of, no elegant manoeuvres and clever traps. On the other side of the murk stood over forty thousand of the walking dead, while the bloodied remains of my ten thousand stood behind walls and palisades like rocks awaiting the tide. And to the sound of rippling drums, a deep rumble that had my soldiers shivering even when they stood behind wards protecting them from the fear-inducing sorcery, the enemy began its advance.

I awaited them on the wall, cold-eyed and patient.

Through scum water and mud, endless ranks of skeletons marched in silent ranks as magic rippled in the distance, Keteran rituals birthing columns of billowing black smoke that rose into the sky

like pillars trying to support the very heavens. The deafening screeches and buzzing of swarms filled the stagnant air, clouds of insects so thick they seemed solid shifting around cacophonous flocks of dead birds. Vermin scuttled through the swamps, rats and other crawling things, a tide that swum and skittered around the footsteps of steel-clad dead. Hulking shapes stirred out of the water, snakes long as streets and crocodiles large as houses, each bearing in their belly more of the hungry dead. Ghouls prowled the host in howling packs, passing below great skeletons bearing large ladders of black iron, and among it all a single great banner flew from an iron mast taller than the tallest of trees: ten silver stars set on a deep purple, perfectly circling a pale crown. It looked like the Dead King had deemed this battle worth the flying of his banner.

It was, I would not deny, a fearsome sight. An army like this would have been a terrible foe even with twice our numbers, well-rested and behind walls of stone. Instead the legionaries of the Second Army stood on baked mud and wood, clutched their weapons as they looked at the ripples in the water that the dead's approach was enough to cause. The cacophony of screeches and buzzing filled the air even as the smoke began to obscure the sky, the great pillars forming a ceiling above us. The noonday sun fell into shade, and as the hideous drums of Keter sounded the shivers settled into the bones of my men. This was not a battle that a reasonable woman would ask them to win. They were tired and few and a very long way from home.

Hune Egelsdottir was dead and the army she'd led for years was still reeling from the loss.

As always, Keter's blade had struck true. I looked at them, and now behind grim faces I glimpsed the first seeds of defeat. Not yet sprouted, but there nonetheless. Their general was dead, and though the way of the Legions and the Army after them was to that every officer could be smoothly replaced there was still something missing at the heart of the Second Army. Hune had led these soldiers from the moment there'd been a banner for them to fight under, and that was not a shallow bond. If I wanted them to win today, the fire gutting out in their bellies had to be lit anew. I sunk deep in the Night and called it close to me, let it swim through my veins and thread into my voice so that whatever I spoke would carry to every ear.

Limping, tired, I climbed up to the edge of the rampart and turned to face my men.

"I am told," I said, and before the third word was finished not soul in the army spoke, "that there has only ever been one legion in the long history of Praes that ever dared to take the cognomen now borne by the First Legion: *Invicta*."

I smiled meeting the eyes of the soldiers around me.

"Undefeated, it means," I told them. "It was a heady boast to make even when it was conferred in the shadow of the surrender at Laure – a feat the Tower only ever achieved twice, over many years of striving."

And not striving gently.

"Yet that's always the way that it's been: the deed is done, the laurel bestowed," I said. "We do not give out a steel avenue before the victory has been won. Even in our bragging, we remain humble."

I laughed in contempt, and at the sound I saw a subtle current go through my men.

"Today is not such a day."

Then went still, and the weight of so many eyes turned on me was almost crushing.

"I already know who you are," I said. "I know it because I knew *you*, back when you were a mere two thousand – half of you snatched from gallows, the rest having never reddened your blade."

The Fifteenth had tasted of war before it was even fully grown, hadn't it? Our roster had still been half empty when we first knew battle.

"All over the world," I said, "wise lords and clever princesses dismissed the thought of you. A bastard legion, they said. A stillborn mistake. And then you won at Three Hills."

I let silence set in for a moment.

"Luck, they argued," I idly said, then paused. "So you won at Marchford."

A battle that'd seemed apocalyptic, long before I'd known the true meaning of the word.

"Again and again they sneered," I said, "and always through the blood and mud you rose. Dormer. Liesse – twice! – and even the green fields of Summer. You broke the back of a dozen princes at the Camps, then humbled the other half at the Graveyard."

And the First Army had, in time, laid down its arms and left the fronts. Not so with the Second: under Hune they had neither withdrawn nor flinched no matter what came calling.

"I have never set an expectation that the Second Army did not surpass," I told them, meaning every word, "not across a dozen ruinous fields of war. In all things, in all strife, your excellence has prevailed."

My gaze swept the soldiers assembled before me, that tapestry that made up the east of the Whitecaps – orc, goblin, Praesi and Callowan – and I honestly could not bear to lie to them. To embellish with some patriotic turn of phrase, to speak of the good of mankind. Not when they had already given so much, and asked so little in return.

“And the truth is,” I quietly said, “I have asked of you more than a queen has the right to ask.”

I gestured towards the swamplands behind us, towards the encroaching nightmare.

“This day, this place, are beyond the duty of your oaths,” I admitted. “You stand halfway across the world, surrounded by death and smoke on all sides, after having already won too many wars under my banner. You have already paid for peace in blood, and yet here you are again: down in the mud, standing alone as horror comes.”

My fingers clenched around my staff.

“So I the cognomen I grant you now is not for victory this day,” I said, “for have you not already won me victories enough? I name you *Excellens*, in the old Miezan, to acknowledge what you already are: surpassing excellence, a neck that was never made to bend.”

Indifference would have had a bite, here, but that was not what I saw in them. It was... hesitation. Uncertainty as to the nature of the gift they had been handed, what it meant.

“I quibble not over this honour,” I said, “because it is your due. A settling of accounts. I would have been ashamed to keep it back any longer.”

But now that I had ended the matter, ceased using it as a bludgeon to get them to fight, I could talk to them without the... pretence. The insincerity.

“And freed of this, without right or call, I ask you once more,” I said. “Fight, and win.”

My voice rose.

“Even though the day is dark and the enemy is great, even though all the world would call it folly to even try, I still ask you,” I said. “*Fight, and win.*”

What I saw in their faces then, I did not have a name for. It was not pride, but it was not far from it. It was not bitterness, but it was not far from it. Maybe it was a little of both, over the years grown together like ivy and oak: inseparable.

"I can give you the word, you know, but it was never mine," I told them. "It was always yours, and in the end the only people who can decide what it means will be you. Now, for good or ill, is the moment where that decision will be made."

In the distance, behind me, I felt the ground tremble under the drums of Keter. Silence and a sea of faces beheld me.

"So what," I softly asked, "will it be?"

The silence stayed. I breathed out, slowly. It had been all I had to give, save for strength of arms, and that they already had of me. I watched them, and my eye caught sight of a pair of tall orcs. Heavies, in dirtied armour. I'd seen them before, I thought, when fighting on the shore. One of them met my eyes, dark to brown, and struck his sword against his shield. It rang out, somehow piercing the cacophony of horror marching against us. It sounded, I thought, like a plea. The answer came further down the line, from another face I recognized – a Taghreb soldier I'd once joked with on the march, who had promised his wife a house in Keter. The sword went against the shield, ringing out again. It was a fair-haired girl, after, the Liessen looks writ strong in her face.

And the sound rose, one sword at a time.

With it the answer to my question came. *Fight*, the Second Army said. *Fight*, the Second Army screamed. *Fight*, the Second Army thundered, until the very air shook with it.

"Once more," I quietly said, as the clamour washed over me and drove back even Keter's screeching for a heartbeat. "Once more."

And I would ask again, I knew that just as they did. And perhaps that on day they would refuse me at last. But today, they would fight.

With the song of ballistas unleashing death, it began.

—

It was all screams and blood and steel. After a while, I could barely tell the difference between one fight and another. I stood ankle-high in mud, sword in hand and hoarsely shouting as a tide of vermin and ghouls crawled through the muck and toppled the tight ranks of a shield wall.

"Hold," I shouted, staff scattering black flame among the mass. "Hold."

They held and they died, unflinching, until the Blessed Artificer scoured herself raw unleashing a cage of Light that bought us a reprieve. The cloudy sky – black smoke had swallowed it all up

like a hungry maw – lit up in the distance with red, a warning of danger, and I ripped myself clear of the muck to limp away.

Gate.

The palisade exploded in a shower of shards, wards shattered as skeletons poured through the gap and our mages desperately struggles to bind fresh wardstones. I charged into the stream of dead, a line of heavies following me as we desperately scrabbled with steel and Night to plug the breach long enough for the Pilgrim's light to incinerate the lizard abomination climbing the wall and a volley of fireballs to buy us just long enough for the sappers to bring down logs in the way.

"Half a cadence," I exhorted. "That's all we need to buy them."

My sword bit into flesh, a ghouls drawing back with an ugly shriek, but a javelin went through the eye of the sergeant to my left and two more were butchered by blades after skeletons entangled them. Through the hole in our wards, a deafening swarm of insects began to pour through. I screamed, tossing a ball of blackflame into them, and Tariq deftly leapt atop a falling log. Light poured out of him in waves as he broke the dead beyond the breach and our wards came back on, cutting off the swarm.

The threat had passed. I was needed elsewhere.

Gate.

Even burning, the snake allowed dead to charge up to the summit of the wall. A massive undead crocodile's jaw ripped at the baked mud, bricks flying every which way, but an arrow hit right between its eyes – an unraveller, too long to be a mortal archer's work – and it dropped lifelessly. I kicked the Bone back down the wall, letting it drop onto another skeleton trying to climb out of the muck, and swept the bottom of the bricks with blackflame.

"Priests concentrate on the ramp," I screamed. "We need to keep them below."

Light came in streams, scything through the skeletons trying to claim a beachhead atop the wall, and when a massive bird made of ghostly blue sorcery struck at the burning snake construct the entire damned thing collapsed as the magical construct exploded.

"Summoner, there you were," I laughed. "*Good man*. We sweep the top, no holds barred."

With power and steel we scattered the enemy, and the moment the crisis was averted-

Gate.

"Keep them in the funnel," I screamed.

The hole in our wards at the centre of the camp was made to look like a great black whirlwind, for it had filled with black smoke and screeching birds. Our mages were fighting back the attack, some sort of devouring spell, but birds were still slipping through. A pack of a dozen slipped out of the roiling smoke, headed towards us, but hellfire lashed out in a cloud of brimstone and Hierophant disappeared them with a slash of his hand.

"It is the smoke," Masego shouted back over the din. "It hides the ward-breaking formula, prevents us from attacking it."

"I have this," the Apprentice claimed, eyes hard as she incanted in a resounding voice.

From her hands glimmering red light poured out, crossing into the black whirlwind and becoming part of it. She kept up the spell, the red glow lending a hellish tint to the Enemy's work but also revealing all the secrets held within.

"Superb," Masego praised her with a grin, glass eyes glinting so warmly it singed the edges of the eyecloth. "And now that your work is revealed, Trismegistus, all that awaits is **Ruin**."

The aspect rippled out, tearing through a spell only he could see, and suddenly the hole filled up. The birds were instantly incinerated, but the smoke stayed – I'd already seen men dying in agony after inhaling it, so with a working of Night I sucked it all into a great ball and passed it off to Masego.

"Do what you will with it," I said.

Gate.

Iron ladders dug into the walls of the fort, skeletons swarming the top of them, and even as my staff slammed into one's side and dropped it below I saw one of the scorpion nests get overwhelmed – goblins killed, engines smashed. The Artificer had taken a wound driving back the Drake, and I was getting tired: we were taking back the fort, but the shore... Three long calls of the horn sounded, and with disbelief I heard the hooves of the Order of the Broken Bells as they counter-charged the dead pouring out of the shallows.

"With me," I shouted, gesturing at the closest line. "Those ladders are ours."

The dead fought hard to keep us away from the iron ladders, and one of those great skeletons nearly made me fall off the wall before Adanna carved it in two, but between the two of us and the honest muscle of my soldiers we trashed all four of the damned

things. Below us the Order of the Broken Bells withdrew as reinforcements for the mauled shield wall on the beach began to pour out of the fort, but with the knights here the danger had ebbed low.

Gate.

No, *gates*.

I'd not been the one to open them this time. There must have been almost a hundred, all large and stable even through Keteran counter-rituals. The pharos device had been used, I realized, likely at Hu- General Zola's order. Or maybe Adjutant's. Neither would have pulled the trigger early, though. Gods, we must have fought for so long delaying any longer would have exposed us to the risk of fighting the third wave as well. Yet we were still hard-pressed by the enemy on all sides, I saw and retreat would be... costly. Maybe if they were coming at us mindlessly, but they had enough Binds to keep them clever enough that they'd do more than mindlessly rush the positions we'd prepared to enable our retreat. I cursed. This was going to get...

The low strum of a cithern went through all of us, as if played straight into our ear. The dead, for a heartbeat, froze. They began to move again, and did not cease even when the melody began in earnest. It was I who froze, though when the singing began.

*"Long have I walked the shore
Known ruin, drunk bitter wine
Brewed in dying light of yore
Before triumph did resign."*

I had expected the Rapacious Troubadour to sign, but it was a woman's voice. One I knew well. And it angered me, just a little, that Akua Sahelian was apparently just as good at singing as she was at damn near everything. It passed, though, as much because of the gentle sadness of the song as what it was accomplishing. I could see it already, though the detail might have been hard to pick out for some.

Not a single Bind was moving.

*"In shaded Wolof I knew
Rest beneath the sycamore
Yet as the western wind blew
My heart cried out for more."*

The orders came down, by my hand and that of others. We would not waste the opportunity: full retreat into the Twilight Ways began.

*"Born grieving, I will die
Holding naught in my hand"*

*So why not reach out and
Pluck stars from the sky?"*

Stand by stand we began our retreat, funneling the dead into killing zones as the House Insurgent unleashed Light and we drew back to one holdfast after another. Already our supply train was passing through the gates, we only needed to last a little longer...

*"I have known kings, petty men
Of pettier kingdoms still
Clutching tight their stolen wren
Using them up to their fill*

*And the poets weep, when did
We become a people ruled?
The empire folly undid
Was raised by people subdued*

*Born grieving, I will die
Holding naught in my hand
So why not reach out and
Pluck the stars from the sky?"*

The shores were empty, the palisade and fort abandoned and what engines had gone unsmashed being dragged through the gates. The Order would go through next, leaving behind an ever-narrowing square of infantry.

*"So let me dance with ghosts,
Beautiful, hungry devils
Let me face great hosts
In dark and bloody revels*

*I will tread the isle blessed
I will burn the fields of red
And should arrant come the west
The river will be fed*

*Born grieving, I will die
Holding naught in my hand
So why not reach out and
Pluck the stars from the sky?"*

The fighting grew increasingly furious, the dead rushing at us in blind waves as our last redoubts wavered. But they were almost done, we could see the light in the horizon: the endless ranks of skeletons had ended, ground into nothing by the unflinching valour of the Second Army. And we retreated inch by inch, back to the gates as the Doom of Liesse sweetly sang.

*"I have shared a bed with doom
Danced with death as a lover*

*Long have I dreamt of my tomb,
And no dream lasts forever*

*But now that the night has come
I raise my hand to the sky
And one last time I succumb
To that old, beloved cry*

*Born grieving, I will die
Holding naught in my hand
So why not reach out and
Pluck the stars from the sky?"*

The last gate closed behind the last living soldier, and so ended the Battle of Maillac's Boot.

*"So why not reach out and
Pluck the stars from the sky?"*

Chapter 70: Solved Game

"Beware of they who laud war, for one who loves the locust cannot love the crop."

– Extract from the transcript of the 'Sermon of the Shores', as spoken by Sister Salienta

Usually the Twilight Ways were a beautiful place, but this time they were as a sea of the wounded and dying.

We did what we could. What few mages were still capable of casting spent themselves raw in the healer tents, the healers among the House Insurgents moved wearily from one half-corpsed to another and I demanded the same of every Named that could still move. Tariq, looking himself a step into the grave, moved tirelessly even and he grew more and more wan. Masego – borrowing the last gasps of the Summoner's sorcery – taught the Apprentice emergency surgery on the most brutal of the beds, snatching the slightest sparks of life and fanning them back to a flame. Even Akua, though some refused her help and I had to surround her with a protective detail. I went as well, of course. With Night little more could be done than delaying death, but that served a purpose.

Every hour meant one more priest Light was no longer burning up from the inside, one more mage whose limbs ceased trembling enough for them to be able to cast. I couldn't save them, for Night would ever be the power of a thief, but I could steal them enough hours that someone else might be able to. Time grew clouded, the kind of mist where one could get lost for a lifetime going around in circles, and I went from blood to blood. Soldiers with faces chewed off, with limbs ripped and bones that'd pierced

through the skin. And the screams, Gods, the *screams*. I pulled out poison and curses, slowed the flow of blood to a crawl and forced hearts to keep beating, Night coming to my hand sharp and steady.

I lost myself to the beat, knowing that General Zola and Adjutant would see to the needs of the Second without me.

It was only when the power grew sluggish in my hands, when my weave slipped and I almost drew poison into a young goblin's heart instead out of his veins, that I forced myself to stop. Night didn't heal in the intuitive manner that Light did so any mistake on my part was likely to kill the wounded involved. I limped away after passing my patient to a priest who couldn't be older than seventeen – *I have taken a generation of my people to war*, I grieved, *harvested them like a farmer reaping wheat* – and leaning heavily on my staff. My leg throbbed so harshly I felt like I might weep, and now that I had released Night my vision was swimming. One of the phalanges, who'd been following me like loyal hounds all night, came close to offer me an arm to lean on. I gestured curtly for her to leave me be.

I forced myself to ignore the moans and weeping from the tents, the soldiers that would not be saved because we did not have enough left in us to save them. The wind kept carrying them to my ear, though, and so further and further away I went. I found a grassy hill, past the outskirts of the camp, where I slowly slumped into the cool blades of grass. Faintly I saw the phalanges beginning a watch around me, but they were not obvious and I made myself not notice them. I leaned in the grass, staff at my side, and looked up at the twilit sky of this strange realm we still understood so very little. I rested my eyes but did not sleep. I was, somehow, too tired for it. I couldn't be sure how long I stayed like this, but eventually I heard footsteps coming up the hill. *Not Hakram*, I thought, and immediately felt guilty. If the phalanges had not gotten in the way there was nothing to worry of, so my eyes remained closed.

I was only when they lowered themselves into the grass by my side and groaned in pain that I recognized who it was. Tariq's joints were, I had gathered, sometimes even worse than my own bad leg. Not even the favour of angels could entirely protect one from the ravages of time: the Grey Pilgrim was as perfectly hale as one of his advanced age could be, but he was still very much that age. Heroes didn't get to cheat aging the way my side did, forever frozen at the apex of our growth and power.

"The Apprentice has retired as well," the Peregrine said. "Though the Hierophant continues. He is a young man of remarkable willpower."

I half-smiled.

"He is more mind than body," I said. "Always has been."

I suspected it would appeal to him a great deal, to become entirely an intellect and be stripped of all the weaknesses and needs of the flesh. The smile faded soon enough, though. I could not hear the wounded from here, the wind prevented it, but I could imagine it so vividly only concentration kept their cries from reaching my ears.

"There is no other army like this," the Grey Pilgrim eventually said. "I have seen many battles, Queen Catherine, but none ever spared so much thought to keeping its own alive."

I would not claim to be the spirit behind that, not when all I had done was imitate the Legions of Terror while being in the position to recruit priests as well.

"There's always too many dead," I tiredly replied. "Always, Tariq. Even when we win."

The old man laughed, and while amusement would have infuriated me there was not a trace of that in the sound: there was enough grief in the sound to drown a dozen men.

"There are some foes that cannot be won against, Catherine," the Grey Pilgrim said. "All we can do is worry our hands to the bone and bury the dead, hoping we saved as many as we could have."

This isn't a plague, I thought. It's not the banal malevolence of the world that killed them, Tariq. I brought them here. I led them to this place, so far from every home they ever knew, so they could die for strangers. For a greater good. And so they'd come, and so they'd fought, and so they'd died. In droves, scared and in pain. Some of their bodies, those we'd not been quick enough to burn, we would see again standing under the banners of Keter.

"I used to hate you a little," I quietly said, "for that night in Callow. The one where you refused to help me as we stood at the crossroads of the things to come."

The old man did not speak, but even with closed eyes I felt him bend as if under a great weight.

"But," I continued, "I think I understand it better now, why the thought of sitting the Tattered Throne so terrified you."

All hail Queen Catherine Foundling, they'd said as they put the crown on my head. First of Her Name, anointed Queen of Callow. I was a warlord on a queen's seat, my boots still dusty from the road and my sword reeking of blood, but in that room where Fairfaxes and Albans had ruled they'd anointed me. And my people had followed me into horror ever since, unflinching. And my

legend, my story – my lie – it was a young one. I had been a glimpse of spring after a long winter, and so more hopes than I deserved to bear had been set on my brow. Tariq Isbili's legend was old, older than even this old man, and it was dyed in the bone of what it meant to be of the Dominion of Levant. My people had, in the years after the Folly, followed me into the dark without flinching.

Levant would have followed the Peregrine into anything at all, even if it shattered them to follow.

"Even your kindness bruises," Tariq finally replied, after a long silence passed.

I inclined my head in concession, as he was not wrong.

"One day I'll ask too much of them," I said, my tone announcing the subject was at a close.

I was not certain what scared me more: that on that day they would refuse me at last, or that they *wouldn't*. In a rough pang, I missed Vivienne. She would have understood, I thought. In a way that no one else could, not even the rest of the Woe.

"Or one day they'll asks too much of you," the Peregrine replied, tone strangely gentle.

We left it at that, the two of staying in silence in the grass, until at last I fell asleep.

—

I woke to a warm meal and mug of tea, Adjutant's wheelchair wedged into the slope of the hill at my side and the Grey Pilgrim nowhere in sight. Hakram let me shake off the last dregs of sleep at my own pace, only beginning to speak once I'd dug into the porridge and warmed my bones with the herbal brew.

"General Zola has the casualty reports," he said.

It was almost enough to put me off eating, but I'd found after a few mouthfuls that I was positively starving. I still set down the spoon, blowing at the steam coming off my tea.

"How bad?" I quietly asked.

"One thousand nine hundred and seventy four dead."

He'd not cushioned the blow, which I appreciated. My fingers clenched around the mug, the too-warm ceramic burning my skin. I pushed through the pain. Almost two thousand dead. A fifth of the Second Army had died at Maillac's Boot.

"Permanent wounded?"

"Seventy one," Adjutant said. "Between Masego and the Peregrine there was little that could not be mended. Mind sicknesses, mostly, come from head wounds that themselves were healed."

I breathed out, relieved. In this, at least, we had been exceptional. It was rarer than rubies for an army to be able to walk away with so many fatalities but so few casualties. I drank down tea, still digesting the scope of what we'd lost. It wasn't the outright one third that just retreating through the gates without preliminaries would have cost us, and we'd certainly mauled the armies that'd assailed us badly – something that we wouldn't have accomplished with a premature retreat – but a fifth of losses was not something to be shrugged off. The Second Army as it was right now, should it be made to fight the battle we'd just fought, might fold before the second wave even arrived.

As an independent force, it was now too dangerous to let it fight a peer army. It'd need to be paired with another set of troops, preferably one that could soak up most of the deaths for my soldiers. *And we'll have lost veteran officers, I thought. Sappers and mages and other specialists I can't replace.* The heart of the Army of Callow and its component armies remained the infantry trained in the Legion methods and those I could still recruit, but all the specialized troops that allowed the Army to maul superior forces were either difficult or outright impossible to replace. Like the goblin munitions that'd allowed me to seize so many victories from the jaws of defeat, they were slowly running out.

"We got bled deep," I finally said.

"And made our foes pay high price for every drop," Adjutant gravelled back. "Every corpse we put to final rest at the Boot is one that we won't be facing at the capital."

It was true, though I still felt like arguing. Instead I polished off the rest of my porridge, that eternal legionary's fare. The tea was not far behind. Hakram's continued silence did not go unnoticed. I glanced at him, finding his face hard to read, and frowned.

"So what is it that you decided to sit on until I got through my..." I trailed off, unsure how much time had passed and so what meal this was.

"Early breakfast," he provided. "And it is not necessarily a problem, Catherine, though the situation will require careful handling."

My frown deepened.

"Not army-related," I decided, "or at least not principally. So this related to my other authority."

High officer of the Grand Alliance, representative for the villains under the Truce and Terms.

"Someone came into a Name during the battle," Hakram said.

Huh. I supposed it'd been brutal enough a grinder to provide that spark, given the right materials to work with.

"Brandon Talbot?" I guessed.

He stood at the alignment of a couple of stories, if you looked at it the right way. Old blood, valiant in battle, about as principled as a nobleman could be while still being a nobleman. Back in Callow there was still a lot of faith bound to what he represented, in certain parts. I'd not caught scent of anything forming there, but sometimes the final stretch of coming into a Name could be quite sudden.

"No," Adjutant said. "Though from the Order of the Broken Bells. A young man who was unhorsed during the countercharge near the shallows and made it back to the ranks on foot after that flank retreated, gathering other survivors to him."

Huh. Fair enough, I supposed. Crows knew it wasn't always the old names that got the nod from Above or Below.

"What are we looking at?" I asked.

"Sixteen, from Laure. Raised at an orphanage before being recruited into the Order three years back," Hakram said. "I'm still finding out which. His name is Arthur Foundling."

I froze in surprise. Foundling. It'd been a long time since I'd last heard that surname tacked on to anyone but me. Yet I had no sole claim to it, as Creation had just deemed it right to remind me. An orphan, huh. I wasn't sure whether that had me wistful or troubled. Then one last detail sunk in.

"Sixteen," I slowly repeated. "That means he's still..."

"A squire," Adjutant gravelled. "*The Squire*, as of yesterday."

I softly laughed, though there was little mirth to the sound. It seemed Above and Below had at last decided that I'd strayed far enough from the last Name I'd held that another had been allowed to fill those worn old boots. *Fuck*, I thought. A Squire. That complicated things. Not necessarily immediately, but certainly down the line. It wasn't even directly relating to me: while I didn't even know which way the boy was leaning at the moment, either way I had no intention of falling into the trap of offering more than cursory mentorship. Yet a squire, as Malicia had once told me, must one day become a knight. And my people, we

liked our knights. Sang songs about them, told stories. Followed them into battle.

Sometimes we even put crowns on their heads.

Sixteen, I considered. Vivienne was older, but not by *that* much. If this Arthur Foundling became the figurehead or even the genuine leader of a force within the Kingdom of Callow, marriage to cement her place on the throne wouldn't necessarily be impossible. I might be looking too far ahead, worrying about things that might never come to pass, but my succession was not something I intended to leave to chance. I clenched my fingers. If he became a threat... God forgive me, but I'd killed boys of sixteen before. It might not come to that, I reminded myself. Yet this stank of the Heavens staking their claim on my home again, and I did not like the shape of it at all.

"What did the phalanges dig up on him?" I asked.

"His past is a dead end, but we have people in the Order," Hakram said. "Popular with the other squires, considered reckless by the knights. The knightess he squired under died at the Boot, and there's been talk of him swearing the oaths to Brandon Talbot instead."

"Not happening," I flatly said.

I liked the grandmaster, but he'd also been part of the Regals – an ill-fated noble faction at my court – before I dismantled them. House Talbot had ruled Marchford as counts once, and had been distinguished among the upper tiers of the Callowan nobility for their wealth and ancient blood. Even stripped of lands and riches, Sir Brandon still had deep connections with parts of the kingdom's nobility that'd never taken to my rule. *And might object to my handpicked successor taking the throne after me, highborn or not.*

"The chatter did not come from Talbot himself, who instead noted that being Named places him foremost under the authority of the Truce and Terms," Hakram clarified.

Mhm. Admirably restrained of him, though I wasn't sure if his hopes would truly toe that line. Talbot knew where my bottom line lay, though, and what the consequences of crossing it would be. That'd keep him in check for a while.

"Personal life?" I asked.

"He was involved with another squire, who died in the retreat," Adjutant said. "The other boy was highborn – House Bickham, landed knights formerly sworn to Dormer. Poor and only nobility for a generation prior to the Conquest."

I grimaced, both at the generous heaping of grief that Fate had seen fit to offer Arthur Foundling and an inconvenient detail just revealed.

"Do we know if he keeps to only men?" I asked.

"Unsure," Hakram admitted.

"Find out," I ordered. "It would close some doors."

Like the possibility of Vivienne wedding him, should it come to that. Dynastic marriages along those lines had happened before, but they had poor reputations for a reason and issue would be, well, an issue.

"Vivienne," Adjutant slowly said, seeing right through me. "That's putting the cart two towns ahead of the horse, I'd argue."

"We're far from a situation where it would even be considered," I agreed, "but I want all angles accounted for."

He nodded. I sighed, stretching my arms.

"I'll have to take his measure in person as well," I said. "And speaking of measure."

I glanced at him with a quirked eyebrow.

"General Zola has proved competent in discharging her duties, though not exceptional," Adjutant said. "Some minor mistakes, all of them swiftly corrected."

"She's been in command for less than a day and got promoted halfway through a battle after her predecessor got assassinated," I flatly said. "She'll settle into the rank, Hakram."

"I'm not impugning her abilities," the orc calmly replied. "I'm trying to temper your expectations, Catherine. She promises to be a solid commander with a good grasp on logistics, but she will not be Hune. She'll be another Bagram, not the kind of rare talents we picked up early in our career."

My fingers clenched. Hune's reputation was not as widespread as Juniper's – the Marshal of Callow had been the face of the military under my reign, and been visibly tied to my campaigns since the first days of the Fifteenth – but it could not be denied she had been highly talented. It had not been without reason she'd been the second highest officer in the Army of Callow. I jerkily nodded.

"I'll keep that in mind," I said. "And I do have a curiosity, actually."

I tapped my temple lightly instead of asking the question outright. That Zola Osei had Soninke highborn eyes – more amber than golden, but then the gold was relatively rare – had not escaped my notice.

“Sister of the current Lord Osei, sworn to High Lord Dakarai of Nok,” Hakram said. “Not an old line, but they’ve been in favour for some time and married well. She was on the losing side of the succession conflict after her father died, and she enrolled in the Legions to avoid assassin blades. Used to be General Afolabi’s supply tribune, it was us that promoted her to legate.”

The last part didn’t particularly surprise me, all things told. One of the great enticements we’d had for the officers of the legions we absorbed after Akua’s Folly was that the Army of Callow was so starved for veteran hands that any officer that went over was nearly guaranteed to go up at least a rank. The Legions of Terror in the decade leading to the Uncivil Wars had been relatively slow to promote, too, so the temptation had been even stronger.

“Dakarai is Sepulchral’s main supporter, so we’ll have to keep an eye on that tie,” I said. “She might not be in a position to cause us trouble, at the moment, but that doesn’t mean her alliance won’t try to get hooks into the Army of Callow.”

While I was broadly inclined to back Sepulchral over Malicia, I had no illusions about the kind of viper I was dealing with. I’d known Abreha Mirembe when she was still merely High Lady of Aksum, and back then she’d already been shockingly coldblooded even by Praesi standards. Having an eye on the Tower would not improve her character in the slightest.

“It will be looked into,” Adjutant said. “We inherited the work the Eyes put in her, but I will get in touch with Scribe when feasible to see if she might have additional insights.”

“Good,” I said, groaning as I dragged myself up.

My rest had been, as always, all too short. I stilled, though, when I caught sight of Hakram’s face. I liked to think I knew him the way few people did – he was, even now, perhaps the person I was closest to in all of Creation – and I’d certainly gotten better at reading him over the years. Earlier he’d delayed giving me news on purpose, but now his silence was different. He was, I thought, hesitating.

“There’s something else,” I said.

“It is not news,” Hakram said. “Not like the others.”

I slowly nodded.

"And yet?"

He licked his chops, still uncertain.

"Masego says that the leg prosthetic has taken well," Hakram said. "He still requires a few days of observation, but he is considering accelerating the timetable for further cuttings."

"The hip," I said.

"I could walk," he said. "By the time we get to Hainaut. Not well, not quickly, and only with crutches but..."

"You could walk," I finished with a soft smile.

He nodded, almost as if at a loss for words.

"I just wanted you to know," Adjutant said.

We took our time going down the hill, between his wheelchair and my limp, but I found the silence between us lighter than it had been in some time.

—

I needed to take exactly one look at Arthur Foundling to know he was going to be a hero.

The boy was almost offensively heroic in appearance, like some higher power had taken the mould of 'young hero' straight out of Callowan culture and poured materials into it. Dark-haired and blue-eyed, with an angular face and strong shoulders, I could already see he was going to grow into a handsome man. He knelt before me after being ushered into the tent, sheathed sword scraping at the ground from the haste of his movement. With a touch of amusement, I saw his jaw twitch from a suppressed wince. Still, after a moment of taking him in I decided he looked... gaunt. Tired. Grieving. He'd lost a mentor and a lover the same day, Adjutant had told me. Under the composure, I suspected there laid a roiling ball of pain and anger.

"Rise," I said.

The young man did, this time careful not to drag his sheath on the ground. He looked unsure, jaw locked tight. He had, I realized in a moment of bone-deep sympathy, likely not been taught the etiquette involved in a royal audience.

"Which orphanage raised you?" I casually asked.

He started in surprise.

"Er," Arthur Foundling got out, "It was Queen Mary's Home for Errant Boys, Your Majesty."

I laughed out in disbelief.

"Wait, you're from *Queenie's*?" I said. "They try to make all their wards into scribes and priests. Gods, do they still have that crabby old sister? I can't remember her name-"

"Sister Jessica's still alive, as far as I know," the squire said, in the tone of someone trying very hard not to speak ill of the clergy. "She, uh, did not approve of my joining the Order."

I wondered how he'd react if I told him that said Sister Jessica had once rapped me on the knuckles thrice with a stick for having thrown a snowball in her face. I'd actually been aiming at this little shit who'd kicked in the wall of our fort three streets up, but I'd missed him and she'd opened the door just then. She'd had a pretty sharp hand for an old lady, it'd stung for several days. *Hells, she must be pushing seventy by now.*

"Our matron at the House would have sent me to the cathedral for remedial moral education if she'd known I wanted to go to the War College," I drily told him.

I'd never found out who it was at my orphanage that was the spy – honestly, knowing Black there'd probably been several – for the Empire, but it'd not been her. My orphanage had been founded and founded by Praes, but the matron herself had not answered directly to any Praesi. The dark-haired boy looked at me hungrily at my words, like he was drowning and I'd just tossed him a rope.

"It's true, then?" Arthur Foundling said. "Your Majesty. That you came from Tit – from the House for Tragically Orphaned Girls?"

"You can call it Tittering House," I snorted. "Nothing I haven't heard before."

The boy's orphanage down the street – not *Queenie's*, which was in another quarter entirely, but the Laure Shelter for Forsaken Boys – had coined the nickname, warranting the reprisal of theirs being called Flaccid Shelter.

"You really did," the boy said, tone almost awed. "I mean, the stories said, but they say so many things..."

Fuck, I thought. I'd known, on parchment, that there would be similarities. That they might pull on my heartstrings some. Yet I'd honestly believed it'd be easy to ignore, to set aside. Instead I was looking at a boy who might grow up into a threat to the legacy I meant to leave behind and seeing a shade of myself at sixteen, all bruised knuckles and fresh out of the orphanage gates.

"It's true," I said. "But it's not me we're here to talk about."

His face locked up tight. I wondered, idly, if that was what I'd looked like when Black was talking to me back in the day. Always straddling hopeful and afraid, guarding my own thoughts so fiercely I might as well have worn them on my sleeves.

"I know about the Truce and Terms, Your Majesty," Arthur Foundling said.

"No," I bluntly replied. "You just think you do. Unless I'm very mistaken, you're leaning the way of the Heavens--"

"I'm not a *heretic*," the boy said, sounding miffed.

"- which means you're going to be in an inconvenient situation," I finished, cocking an eyebrow at the interruption.

His face blanked again, but he did not apologize. I could appreciate a spine, so long as he understood when he was overstepping.

"As a heroic Named, you representative under the Terms will be the White Knight," I said.

He did not well hide his surprise. I got where he was coming from, of course. A Callowan hero grown in the wilds would not have considered themselves bound to me save perhaps in enmity, but this one had been a squire in my own knightly order for three years. He wouldn't be seeing this in terms of hero and villain – I was both his queen and an older Named, in his eyes I would have been the natural authority. Perhaps not one entirely trusted or obeyed, but undeniably an authority.

"You're the Queen of Callow, though, Your Majesty," he hesitantly said.

"Yes, and unless you intend to renounce your oaths as a knight of the Order of Broken Bells--" I paused there, and he empathically shook his head, "then I still remain your commander. Hence the inconveniences. For now the troubles are minor, but once we rejoin with our sister host I will have to speak with the White Knight about this."

My eyes narrowed and I studied the boy.

"You have intentions," I said.

The Squire paled, his limbs stilled, but he did not deny it. He would not have come into a Name if there had not been something burning in his belly, and we both knew it.

"I thought I knew where my life was headed," he bitterly said. "And now Sir Alexis is dead and..."

His lips thinned and he held his tongue.

"You've been looked into," I gently said. "We know about your lover."

"I had hoped to keep that grief my own," Arthur Foundling said.

And for a moment, as his face grew solemn, I glimpsed the make of a Knight in him. The potential was there. Whether it made him a boon or a danger, though had yet to be decided.

"That possibility went up in smoke," I honestly said, "the moment when you became the Squire. You have eyes on you now, Arthur Foundling. Your actions will have repercussions."

"I just wanted to be a knight," he tiredly replied. "To bring back the banners that the Praesi buried and you left in their grave, Your Majesty."

Now was not the time, I thought, to have a conversation about the difficulties inherent to assembling a large mounted force – particularly one made up largely of lesser nobility whose allegiance to me would vary between shaky and nominal – in the Callow I'd come to rule after the Doom of Liesse. Maybe one day, if the boy was destined to be anything but a man on a horse very good at righteously killing people, but not today. I was all the more wary of teaching him the way Black had once taught me because I rather wanted to. I remembered what it was like, standing in those shoes and feeling both more capable and more lost than you'd ever been before.

Part of me itched to pass those lessons on the way they had been passed to me, and that was a *dangerous* thing.

"I left them there for a reason," I said, "but that is a conversation for another day."

I drummed my fingers against the side of my staff thoughtfully. Best to carefully control the amount of time I spent around this one.

"Adjutant will go over the details of the Truce and Terms with you," I said, "so that you may fully understand your rights and responsibilities. Until then, you remain a squire in the Order of Broken Bells."

He pressed his fist against his heart in acknowledgement.

"You won't be swearing squire oaths to another knight until I have, at the very least conferred with the White Knight over the matter," I added. "Your position is already too complicated for my tastes."

"Yes, Your Majesty," he acknowledged.

"Good," I said. "Then you are dismissed, Arthur Foundling."

He bowed, but after straightening hesitated instead of leaving. I cocked an eyebrow again.

"The stories," the boy said, "they say you used to be the Squire as well."

"I was," I agreed, cocking my head to the side.

"So you had them too," Arthur said. "The dreams, I mean."

Huh. Name dreams already.

"I had dreams," I said, "but likely not the same as you."

Although, Hells, I'd been the last Squire hadn't I? Was he going to get Name dreams from *my* years bearing the Name? I was still alive, but Black had been as well when I'd gotten glimpses of his life. Unless he was going to get dreams from a Squire that'd been headed Above's way, and I'd only gotten my father's career in my sleep because he'd been the last Squire headed into a Name sworn to Below. I didn't actually have an answer to that. Crows, it would have been effectively impossible to get answers about this a few years ago: heroes and villains hadn't exactly sat down for pleasant chats about the nature of Names, back before the Truce and Terms.

They still didn't, honestly compelled me to admit, but at least the thought was no longer so glaringly absurd.

"So you didn't dream about the sword, then?" the Squire asked.

"Which sword?"

"The broken one," he hesitantly said. "The pieces are in far places, but always deep below water."

I kept my face calm, though I felt a surge of both fury and indignation. *Fucking Hashmallim*, I cursed. *Fucking* Choir of Contrition and their grubby meddling hands. I'd snapped the Penitent's Blade in dozens of pieces and scattered some of them them as far as the Tyrian Sea, I wasn't going to let that damned sword get reforged. Someone wielding it anew had my death written all over it. I was going to have to talk to Hierophant about the practicalities of expressing my displeasure there.

"I knew that sword before it was snapped," I said. "It is best left scattered, Arthur Foundling, lest you want Contrition to sink its hooks into your soul."

He didn't look like he entirely believed me, but my warning hadn't gone into deaf ears either: the young squire had looked distinctly unenthused at the notion of being bound to angels. This time he took his leave for good, leaving me to lean against my desk with a conflicted look on my face. The Squire seemed like

a good kid, honestly. A little rough around the edges, but it was nothing he couldn't grow into.

I hoped I wasn't going to have to kill him, before this was all over.

—

On the first day the Second Army rested. On the second it marched, and on the fifth we found the other column.

From there, I knew, there was only one place to go: the capital, where it would all be won or lost.

Chapter 71: Eschatology

"An enemy may suffer a hundred defeats yet avoid being defeated; seek not victories, only victory."

— Extract from the 'Ars Tactica', famed military treatise of Dread Emperor Terribilis the First

I'd barely set foot back in Creation and already I was itching to return to the Ways.

The Second's outriders had run into a patrol of Prince Klaus', bringing back the uplifting news that the Iron Prince had crushed the dead in a decisive engagement. Soldiers had named it the Battle of the Pools, as it'd been fought near a dry bog where the mud had hardened and stagnant water remained trapped in pools. Way I heard it told, Old Klaus had baited the dead into open grounds with bold skirmishing by Dominion slingers and then forced a clash of shield walls while his cavalry went to hit the flanks. It'd been a close-run thing even so, before the reinforcements I'd sent under Princess Beatrice were found by the White Knight and led into a charge that hit the enemy in the back and completed the encirclement. That'd secured a full wipe of enemy forces, which had numbered more than thirty thousand. It was the kind of clean successes that came rarely in this war.

It'd brought some cheer back to the Second Army, as had the prospect of soon being reunited with the rest of the coalition forces. Klaus Papenheim's reputation as one of the finest military commanders of our age had been proved as well-deserved once more, considering he'd led his beleaguered army in securing two major victories against numerically superior enemy armies – and the first time the dead had even been entrenched! I'd expected that it was a triumphant war camp we'd link up with, perhaps even with ale rations having been let loose in celebration of the victory. Instead, as the Second Army began to cross back into Creation, the word that trickled back to me was that of a somber, tense camp. The fantassin companies with the

Iron Prince were, I was told, on the verge of mutiny. They were refusing to march until officers that had been arrested were returned to them.

There'd been trouble, it seemed, within the other column. I got the lay of the land before crossing, wary of putting forward my foot without a good idea of what it was I was headed into. Apparently the Battle of Juvelun, where Prince Klaus had pushed the undead out of the eponymous village where they'd dug in, had been a rough affair for the fantassins and gotten Prince Etienne of Brabant killed. The dead had retreated from the defeat with some semblance of order and began to muster further into the valley for a counter-attack, which had forced the Iron Prince to strike at them before they could mass enough to prove a threat. Except part of his army had balked at the order. The mercenaries felt they'd been ill-used and might be once more, while the Brabantine conscripts weren't eager to march out tired into another bruising engagement when they'd lost their prince in the last one.

There had been stirrings of unrest, so the Iron Prince had arrested or slain the potential mutineer officers and promptly forced a march against the enemy before the situation could further worsen. It'd worked, at least to the extent that this kind of measure could work. They'd fought, for lack of allies or other options, but the moment the dust had settled the mutineer sentiment returned – only twice as hardened, as they'd been browbeaten last time and were wary of a repeat. The conscripts had been settled somewhat, temporary Lycaonese officers having been forced on them while their formations got mixed – to prevent cliques sticking together – and separated in different parts of the camp. It'd not entirely worked, though, as some clever soul had found a loophole in Proceran desertion laws. It was, technically, no such thing if you signed on with a fantassin company sworn to the same fight. There'd been an influx of fresh 'recruits' after word was spread, which had only raised tensions.

Still, while I saw the sense in some of the grievances voices my sympathy was significantly dampened by the fact that the fantassins had effectively slowed Prince Klaus' march west to a crawl for several days before refusing to march entirely. What little time we'd managed to gain on the enemy through bloody losses and use of the Twilight Ways had been effectively lost. Even if we began the march on Hainaut city this very evening, we wouldn't arrive there more than a few days before the dead. I'd been hoping for a significantly larger margin so that we might repair the defences of the capital as much as possible before Keter besieged us there. Even now, every heartbeat wasted limping through the muddy camp grated at my sensibilities. Each beat saw the dead grow closer, saw our lead narrow and our hopes of victory dim.

The chatter died when I hobbled into the pavilion. I leaned on my staff, step after step, and felt the eyes of all assembled fall on me. I saw the Iron Prince first, at the end of the long table: the white-haired general had risen to his feet and he offered a short bow, to which I returned a nod. The Heavens had their men as well, a tired-looking Hanno of Arwad on his feet besides Tariq. Their greetings were silent and I returned them just as quietly. The last man at the table seemed like he'd aged a decade since I'd last seen him, as if some capricious god had kicked the vigour out of his bones, but the dark hair and elaborate moustache of Prince Arsene of Bayeux could not be mistaken. He did not seem pleased to be here, I decided, as was only fitting.

Old Klaus had raised him to his war council with the understanding that the Alamans would be able to handle his own people, even the fantassins, and in that duty he had failed most utterly. Little of this reflected well on him, in either our eyes or those of the officers he'd stood for. The Prince of Bayeux had been able to keep his soldiers and reputation off the chopping block in this war, until now, but it seemed that at last the blade had pricked the skin. He wasn't going to get out of this without losing a few feathers, I thought, though it was not my place to go pulling at them.

My eyes then swept to the rest of the men and women in the pavilion, of which there had to be at least forty. None of them were seated, though neither were they shackled as I'd half-expected them to be. There were a few Lycaonese guards around, but not many – I supposed there would have been no point, with the likes of Tariq and the White Knight in the pavilion. The arrested officers did not look like they'd been mistreated, the only bruises I found being faded, and though they were visibly filthy I saw no trace of sickness among them.

"Your Majesty," the Prince of Hannover greeted me. "Your return is a pleasant turn."

"So was the news of the victory at the Pools, Your Grace," I replied.

Only two of my guards followed me in, looming silently behind. I turned a steady eye to the assembled prisoners, noting several bowed.

"Yet this was not," I mildly added, "how I expected my time to be spent after our hosts joined again. The request I received was rather mild on details, in truth. If one of you would elaborate?"

"Your Majesty," the Prince of Bayeux spoke up, calling my attention with a bow of his own. "If I may?"

"Do."

"At the behest of these officers in the service of the Grand Alliance, I carry a plea for your judgement," the prince said.

He had a nice speaking voice, I thought. Practiced, but the smoked honey in there was a natural gift. Didn't make me like what I was hearing from in the slightest. I cocked an eyebrow.

"It was my understanding that the Prince of Hannover, who held command, already passed judgement on them," I said.

"This is true," Prince Arsene agreeably said. "However, no formal trial was held and as both the supreme commander in Hainaut and high officer of the Grand Alliance your authority supersedes his."

Meaning they didn't like what Old Klaus had decided, so they were coming to me in the hopes of a milder sentence. If not an outright amnesty.

"In principle that is correct," I noted, then glanced at Hanno. "White Knight, a question if you don't mind?"

Hanno slowly nodded.

"Did these officers refuse to obey a direct order from their lawful commander?" I plainly asked.

The White Knight looked like he'd wanted to grimace but held back.

"They did," Hanno admitted.

"Then the matter is settled," I coldly said, eyes returning to the prisoners. "Hang them all."

There was moment of utter surprise in the room, until the officers began to clamour. I picked our pleas, in Chantant and Arlesite, but also curses and insults. Some even tried to argue, yelled that there had been a mistake, but all I saw when I looked at them was three days lost. The deaths that the time pissed away would cost us. *I mutilated the Second Army for you, you fucking vultures*, I thought. *And now you want to mutiny and wiggle your way out? I'd slit the throat of every last one of you and not lose a wink of sleep over it.* The yelling continued with no sign of abating, even the guards tried to restore order, and I lost what little patience I had left.

"Shut up," I Spoke.

With a snap their mouths closed, like puppets whose strings had been pulled. I felt the gazes of both heroes in the tent move to me in surprise, which surprised me in turn. The Pilgrim, at least, should have known I could now Speak again. I had disciplined the Silver Huntress using the talent. Yet after a

glance their way, I saw that it was not the Speaking itself that'd startled. His mouth had wavered. Just for a heartbeat, I figured, but for the barest of moments my words had had an effect on the Grey Pilgrim. It was me who was astonished, as I'd not tried to exert my will against him in the slightest. The rules behind Speaking were opaque even to me, but usually it only worked on people *weaker* than you. Even then it wasn't a guarantee, some sort of claim to authority over them tended to make it easier. *And I'm not much stronger than the Grey Pilgrim*, I thought, *if I am at all*.

What that implied...

I withdrew any strand of will lingering against the four men at the table, freeing them of struggle. The Prince of Hannover looked wary, but Prince Arsene was outright gasping. He rasped out a breath.

"Your Majesty," he got out. "This is a mistake. You did not..."

"I see no reason to change my judgement," I mildly said. "Mind you, it was never formally requested or given. If this talk of appeal was revealed to be only a tasteless jape..."

I shrugged.

"Then I would walk out of this tent and leave this in the trusted hands of Prince Klaus Papenheim," I said. "I imagine you could appeal to him for mercy, were he in the mood to grant it."

I glanced at the prince in question, raising a questioning brow. He gave a discreet nod, to my mute surprise. So he was willing to find a use for this lot that didn't involved feeding crows. Fine. They were his, and his to deal with as he wished.

"Perhaps," Prince Arsene said, "that would be best."

I watched him, saw how now that his breathing was in order he was once more mastering himself. Saw how he was looking around trying to look for an angle, for a way to still come out on top. And maybe on another day I would have said nothing. Let it go. Procer would be Procer, and not even the end of times would make saints out of princes. Instead I found my fingers drumming against my leg the first few beats of *Stars From the Sky*, and I ground my teeth. I could almost smell the mud and blood and ash, hear the screams as the Second Army retreated foot by foot under bloody onslaught.

"Say it," I quietly ordered.

The dark-haired prince blinked in confusion. I met his eyes, unsmiling.

"Your Majesty, I do not und-"

"Say it," I repeated, and my tone was cold as ice.

His lips thinned.

"It was," Prince Arsene of Bayeux got out, "a tasteless jape."

I let silence linger a moment so that the embarrassment could properly sink it.

"Don't ever waste my time like this again," I said.

I turned and limped out of the pavilion without speaking another word.

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It wasn't a formal war council in the sense that we wouldn't be tactics or arrangement tonight. When it came to that, the crowd of captains and commanders involved would require a far larger tent than this. Instead it was the keystones of the various forces within the Grand Alliance army defending Hainaut that'd been assembled for the talks. For the Dominion stood Lord Razin Tanja and Lady Aquiline Osen as well as the commander the Lord of Alava had sent to lead his warriors, Captain Nabila. For the Principate three royals had come: Old Klaus for the Lycaonese, Princess Beatrice of Hainaut and Prince Arsene of Bayeux for the Alamans. For the Firstborn, both General Rumena and Ivah had shown up. Rounding up the hosts, Calm-faced General Zola stood for the Second Army while I held claim on both Callow and Below.

As the heroes had sent both the White Knight and the Grey Pilgrim, I'd also called for the Barrow Sword to stand for villains – as far as I was concerned he'd proved himself as a lieutenant during his tenure as part of the Iron Prince's army, and I fully intended to keep using him in that capacity. In other circumstances such a gathering of the prominent would have led to an inevitable amount of chatter and hobnobbing, but not this evening. All of us felt the cold breath of Keter against the back of our neck and it had cut through the usual practices. Already skirmishing with undead warbands was starting, a sure sign it was time to get the Hells out of here and into the Twilight Ways before we had another battle on our hands. One we might not win, this time. I cleared my throat to call for attention, the panoply of warlords and royals granting it.

"We're all here, so let us begin," I briskly said. "No one in this room requires introduction, so we'll directly attend to the matter at hand."

Adjutant had arranged for our maps of the principality of Hainaut and its outskirts to be sent, and attendants had artfully

displayed them on the great table around which all of us were arranged. Much of where the enemy was shown by markers to have armies was now guesswork, considering three battles had been fought in quick succession over the last week – General Abigail's assault on the Cigelin Sisters, the Second Army's holding action at the Battle of Maillac's Boot and the Iron Prince's fresh victory at the Battle of the Pools. We still didn't know if Abigail had taken the Sisters, but given her forces and the reinforcements involved she ought to have succeeded. Casualties involved on either side were unknown, while the Second hadn't exactly had the time to count corpses as it retreated into the Ways at the end of the battle.

By now the great valley of central Hainaut, a great bowl in which the capital of the principality stood near the centre, would be a tumultuous mess of warbands and marching columns and smashed undead armies. Out east the great undead army of at least two hundred thousand that'd pursued the Iron Prince since his ill-fated march on Malmedit was gaining on us, likely past the village of Juvelun by now. Our reunited army needed to get moving and fast, if it wasn't going to get stuck between the great force coming from the west, which the Second had bled to delay, and the even greater army pouring down the heights of Juvelun. The only question that remained to be answered was where our coalition army should march to. I believed the right answer to that was the city of Hainaut, the capital itself.

Yet while in principle I had the authority to simply give the order to march and expect to be obeyed, in practice trying to cram my plan down the throat of the people in this tent was only possible if they were inclined to swallow. That meant convincing them, or at least settling their most pressing objections.

"As all of you can see, the valley of Hainaut is swarming with undead," I bluntly said. "Soon there will be a strict minimum of about four hundred thousand corpses running around the region. Remaining where we are now encamped is a recipe for disaster, as it would ensure we would be harassed and ultimately encircled by a massively superior enemy force."

None argued the fact, as it was plainly on the maps and markers to any eye practiced in the trade of war. I swept the council with my gaze.

"More concerning is the fact that we are now running low on supplies," I said. "The column under Prince Klaus was entirely cut off from its supply lines for over a week, so it burned through its entire reserves. The forces I brought north will be sharing our own supplies, naturally, but that's not a solution – it's throwing a cup of water at a bonfire."

And that was after we'd even cheated a little when it came to supplies. Unlike us General Abigail was still going to have access

to the supply line coming up from our defensive lines to the south, so I'd stripped the larders of the Third Army and its fantassin helpers dangerously bare before marching north through the Ways. It'd felt like kicking her in the ribs at the time, but I was now rather pleased I'd decided to play it safe.

"The adjunct secretariat, after collating the numbers given by all you, believes we have around six days before rationing becomes necessary," I said. "After that, we have perhaps a week at half-rations before our larders are empty."

"And if we begin rationing from the start?" Prince Klaus asked.

"Three weeks, maybe a little more," I replied.

Half-rations, though, meant that our people wouldn't be at their sharpest. Given that our main advantage against the dead lay in the qualitative superiority of our rank and file against theirs, that was a bold gamble to make.

"We must act, and act now," I told them. "That much can't be argued with. What must be done, however, deserves a degree of argument. The floor is open to any who wish to speak."

There was a beat of hesitation, as if no one was quite certain they wanted to be the first to put a foot forward.

"You will have a plan, Losara Queen," Ivah said. "As is ever your way."

"I do," I agreed. "But this council is meant to be a fair hearing for any of you with an answer to give."

Captain Nabila, who I could not help but notice was only a few inches taller than me – if significantly broader and more stockily built – cleared her throat.

"I was told that Abigail the Fox took the Cigelin Sisters, along with the forces we had held back until now," she tried.

"We can't be sure she did, but the odds are good," Prince Klaus told her.

"Then we should thrust westwards, towards Cigelin," Captain Nabila said, tone firming. "The dead are in disarray, and we have great numbers. We can smash lesser warbands on our path, and when we arrive at the Sisters supplies can flow in from the south again."

The Princess of Hainaut stirred.

"They'll tarpit us if we try that march, Captain," Princess Beatrice said.

"I do not understand your meaning," the painted Levantine frowned.

"They will fight like barrowmen," Aquiline Osenia clarified. "Throw corpses at us to slow us down until they gather a great enough force to slay us in one stroke."

The captain hummed in understanding, nodding decisively.

"If we stay in the countryside we'll be going through bogs and swamps," Princess Beatrice added. "We'll be moving slow regardless. And if we cut to Julianne's Highway as quickly as possible, our line of attack becomes glaringly obvious."

And predictable tended to get costly, when you fought Keter.

"It seems wise to cede the grounds," Razin agreed, eyes narrowing. "We cannot take or hold them. Yet the westward march itself is a sound idea, I would argue. If we retreat to the Cigelin Sisters through the Ways, we can muster with the forces of General Abigail and prepare for a decisive engagement there."

"Keter will not grant it," General Rumena said. "It will withhold the blow and leave hunger to disperse us without a single blade being raised."

Razin, I thought with a degree of approval, had good instincts. If smaller armies had been involved, his answer would have been a good one. The problem was that, as the Tomb-Maker had pointed out, we wouldn't actually be able to *feed* that army if it was gathered together. It was one of the reasons we'd split our offensive into two columns in the first place – the force I'd originally advanced with, some seventy thousand soldiers, had been stretching the limit of what our logistical train was physically able to provide for. All armies involved had taken losses, sure, but at the end of the day we'd still be asking of that same apparatus that'd struggled with my column alone to now also handle the second column and our reserve on top of it. No, Razin had good instincts but it showed that the Levantine wars he'd been raised to fight just didn't involve the same scale of armies being dealt with.

"Turning back towards Juvelun would be suicide," Prince Arsene said. "No doubt our pursuers from Malmedit have already restored the fortifications there. We would have to take those grounds from a larger army once more, only this time while being struck at from behind as well."

"Juvelun is lost ground," Prince Klaus agreed. "And it no longer has strategic value even if we did take it – we forced that gate to be able to march into the valley, but it's too late to try and keep it closed for the army that pursues us."

"We could still attempt a strike at Malmedit," General Zola said.

That got the attention of most everyone here, including myself.

"If the burden of numbers is too much for our supply train, we must split our forces again," the dark-skinned general said. "A large detachment can be sent to strike in surprise at Malmedit and collapse the tunnels, as was originally meant, while we consolidate the rest of our forces at the Sisters. If this draws the dead to us at the Sisters, as seems likely, that same detachment can then march in haste to Juvelun and seal the valley around the dead."

There were some murmurs of approval, and I cocked my head to the side. It was the answer of a classic War College general, I thought. Strategic goals had been sent and were to be met, using our relative advantages – mobility by the Twilight Ways, in this case – over the enemy, and concentrating strength at where we were weakest to negate the enemy's advantages. It was the kind of war that Black and Grem One-Eye liked to fight, measured and clever and very well-organized. Her answer, however, was also wrong. General Zola Osei understood war through the eyes of a professional, so it was only natural that it was the complete opposite that would find the fault in her answer.

"That's a dead end," Aquiline Osená said.

Surprised eyes turned to her, several disapproving. The Dominion had impressed with the bravery of its warriors, during the war, but not the acumen of its generals.

"She's right," I agreed.

Aquiline offered me a smile that might have passed for grateful, if you squinted a little. I winked back.

"It's a clever trick, but it doesn't *win* us anything," the Lady of Tartessos said. "The tunnels at Malmedit are useless now, there's no army left to go through them – we know where all of them are. Even if it works and we close the valley by holding Juvelun, what does it get us? The dead are already where they want to be."

"It's an approach that tries to mitigate the damage, not achieve victory," I agreed.

If we were trying to mitigate though, it was a solid plan. It would secure us a very advantageous position for an offensive next year and ease the burden of our defense by giving us chokepoints to defend instead of a long line in the lowlands. The issue was that the payoff would come next campaigning season. See, Black and Grem they'd taught a generation of officers to fight their way – as I'd thought earlier, measured and clever and

very well-organized. Except that we couldn't *afford* to fight this clean, this careful. If that bridge up north got built, we'd be losing Hainaut. We needed to win the campaign now, before winter came, and that meant we'd have to take risks. The same kind of risks that my father abhorred, that would have gotten him killed if he'd tried them against a hero at my age.

But I wasn't him, and the war I was fighting wasn't the same either.

The Iron Prince sighed, looking at the maps.

"Agreed," he finally said. "If we don't win this campaign now, we might not have the warm bodies to do more than hold come next summer."

Grim, but he wasn't wrong.

"Can victory still be achieved?" Princess Beatrice calmly asked.

If anyone else here had spoke those words, I thought, half the people in the tent would have marked them a coward. None dared, though, when the woman speaking them was the princess of this very land we stood on. Few of us here had more burning hatred for the dead, or lost more at their hands. Idly I wondered if she was asking the question because she had genuine doubts, or simply because she'd recognized that if she didn't ask it no one else would dare to.

"Yes," I calmly replied.

"Then where is that that you would have us march exactly, Black Queen?" Prince Arsene impatiently asked.

"Hainaut," the White Knight quietly said. "The capital, that is."

Hanno had remained silent for so long I figured half the people in here had forgot he was even there. As for Tariq, as far as I could tell he'd spent more time using that nosy little aspect of his to have a look at the insides of the people than actually listening. I smiled mirthlessly at the hero, knowing that it wasn't military learning that'd led him to the conclusion. After all, it was not only strategy that'd led me to decide the capital was our shot at winning this.

"The capital is where I would have us march," I agreed. "As soon as possible – tomorrow at least, tonight if at all possible."

"Would the issue of supplies not remain?" Razin Tanja asked. "The grounds between the Cigelin Sisters and the capital are still in the hands of the dead, and I had thought it impossible to arrange a supply line through the Twilight Ways."

"It is," General Zola frowned. "Your Majesty, I have seen the same numbers as you. We simply do not have enough mages and priests for this – past a certain distance and a certain amount of soldiers, the amount of wagons we are able to send at the speed we can send them mean keeping the force supplied is not possible."

"That is true," I said, "so long as you need individuals capable of making gates to actually take the journey."

Meaning, if we had to send a priest or mage with every wagon – more realistically, a few priests and mages with every caravan of wagons – then there came a point where, if we kept sending wagons, all the available priests and mages would be in the Twilight Ways. Either headed to the place getting supplied, or heading back to the place where the supplies were being sent for. If the army was small and where it was camped close to where the supplies came from, that wasn't an issue. The journey was quick, and you could either avoid having a stretch of time where there were no more supplies coming in or make it so short it hardly made a difference. The trouble came when the army was large, as ours was, and the distance between the origin of the supplies and their destination was large. This was, unfortunately, also the case.

You got rid of that problem, though, if the gate-opened didn't actually need to make the journey. If the wagons could simply get there on their own.

"But that is needed, my queen," General Zola said.

"Unless we open a permanent gate within the capital," I said.

The room went still. It would be a risk, I'd not deny it, because if we lost the capital afterwards then the Dead King would have a gate into the Twilight Ways to study. On the other hand, the capital of Hainaut was probably the single most fortified city in the principality and once my sappers got to work it'd become even more defensible. We'd also be able to feed a *significantly* larger force in the city than our physical supply train would allow for. All we needed for the journey was for someone to open a gate near wagons somewhere in Procer and thread into it the destination of the 'Hainaut gate', and those supplies would get to the capital eventually. We wouldn't hold the road to the capital but it wouldn't matter, because so long as you had a mage around *everywhere* was a road to Hainaut.

"Those are difficult to make, I was told," Prince Klaus said. "Could we even make one quickly enough?"

"Us, I'm not sure," I admitted. "But you might remember we have fresh allies, since our summit at the Arsenal."

"The Gigantes," Princess Beatrice breathed out. "Is that why you sent them with my forces when we relieved the Iron Prince?"

In part, though I'd also been worried about exposing them to the dangers the Second Army had been about to face – or leaving them with General Abigail, where there would be no Named to pull them out of the fire if Revenants attacked in surprise.

"The Dead King might not assault the walls even if we seize the capital," Prince Arsene said. "A long siege to grind us down would suffice."

"A siege with its back to the army at the Cigelin Sisters," Klaus Papenheim replied. "And all the while we could sally out at will through the Ways, with strong walls to return to after. We can only hope they will try what you suggest."

"They will not," the Grey Pilgrim said, breaking his silence at last. "Mark my words, and that of the Choir I am sworn to: once the gate is opened in the capital, the enemy will know no rest until that city is razed to the ground."

No one, I noted with grim amusement, saw fit to argue with *that*. There was some more talking, afterwards, but I had them and most of the people in the tent knew it. By the hour's turn I had the agreement of everyone there. So on we went to Hainaut, to the last flip of the coin that would decide whether this summer was the dawn of the Grand Alliance's victory or defeat.

That in the city doom awaited none would deny, but like everyone else I rather wished I could know ahead *whose* doom it was going to be.

Chapter 72: Omen

"As the long summer dies the wolves will dance with the sons of the king, and though cities will fall in the end the only victor will be death."

– Extract from the prophetic 'Book of Manifold Dooms', by the Augur Kaspar Reitzenberg (widely considered useless, as it foretells events both past and future without drawing distinction)

The city of Hainaut was a beautiful sight.

When I'd first laid eyes on it, last summer, the majesty of it had startled me. The capital had been built atop a tall and precipitously steep plateau – at its highest point it must have been at least three hundred feet going down in a straight line – that jutted out of the valley in more or less the shape of a hand laid flat, with the fingers in that description representing a

gradually declining slope headed down towards the valley floor. A butte, which was the Proceran name for a hill so tall and narrow it was almost as a pillar of rock, jutted out slightly to the left of where the 'fingers' began, almost like the point of thumb. The most eye-catching part aside from the height, though, was the pale white wall circling around the city occupying the plateau heights. From closer up the ramparts of pale granite were revealed to be more of a pale grey with impurities, but at a distance and in the morning light it looked like the capital was crowned by walls of white stone.

"It is grand city, this Hainaut," the Apprentice said in a hushed tone. "I studied among the schools in the high hills of Ashur, yet even their splendour pales in comparison."

"It's pretty enough," the Squire conceded. "Seems like a lot of trouble, though. I hope they have good wells, or it's going to be a bloody walk down and back up that slope every morning with full buckets."

I swallowed a grin and Hakram gave me a rather droll look. I'd made a comment not too dissimilar after having my first look at it. I suspected the shared experience of having had the water chore – fetching buckets for baths or cleaning – had led to a shared skepticism of living anywhere water would need to be brought uphill.

"There is not a speck of romance in you," the Ashuran mage reproached him.

"Romance I want out of a lover," Arthur Foundling snorted, "but out of a city, I much prefer functioning sewers. Gods, just imagine if it doesn't rain up there for a month and the drains go dry. The *stink*."

I cocked an eyebrow at Hakram. Boy had a point. Mind you, the Vaudrii – the Alamans tribe that'd first settled here – had not been idiots. They'd not just picked the place because it'd look nice from a distance.

"Almost a fourth of the plateau, like a teardrop at the centre, is taken up by a great pool that the locals call *le Bassin Gris*," Adjutant informed both the young heroes. "It is fed by rain, which is frequent in these parts, but also by several great underground aquifers. Though you cannot see it from where we stand, near the back of the city there is a waterfall going over the edge of the cliff."

"See?" the Apprentice triumphantly said. "It was a sound notion, and soundly executed. You simply cannot stand to see anyone spending coin anything but a good horse or sordidly unseasoned meat stew."

"If I seasoned it the way you do, Sapan, my skin might just turn permanently red," the Squire drily replied. "And a good horse is a sounder investment than white walls by any reasonable measure. The wall's stuck in the same place, and you can't ride it."

Hakram cleared his throat and both youngbloods immediately went silent, looking somewhat guilty at having bickered into front of us even if it'd been amicably. The orc was only amused, though. He'd been in a good mood all morning. Some of that no doubt had to do with the way that he wasn't sitting in a chair and instead standing on his own, though he was leaning heavily against iron-bound crutches. Even the leg he'd not lost had become weak in the time he'd spent without using it, so standing for more than a few moments at a time was both tiring and painful to him. Leaning on the crutches took the edge off that, though Masego had ordered me not to let him do it for too long. Orc musculature was different from that of humans, so doing this would actually begin pinching a muscle in his armpit that humans didn't have.

"Princess Beatrice told me that about a century back they had to make laws about not throwing filth and detritus into the Bassin Gris," I idly added. "It'd gotten so tainted the locals were calling it the Brown Basin instead, so now there's a designated point for that near the waterfall. All the sewer drains lead there as well."

"See," Arthur Foundling smugly grinned at the other Named. "I told you-"

Adjutant cleared his throat again, which killed that in the crib, and glanced at me reproachfully. I shrugged, unrepentant. Laure rats stuck together, at least to the extent that wasn't going to get me killed. The White Knight had rather frankly told me that there simply was no one in a position to take the Squire as even an informal apprentice, at the moment, so he saw no need to move the boy from his current placement. For the moment at least. That'd been with the understanding that I wasn't just going to put Arthur in a padded box somewhere into total isolation from other Named, though, so I'd arranged to have him introduced to a few people. Apprentice, whose given name I had recently learned was Sapan, was one of them. On the heroic side, I'd also presented him to both Roland and the Silver Huntress.

I wasn't going to pretend I'd not chosen those names and Names carefully – Apprentice both young and based far away, the Silver Huntress raised by Ranger and uninterested in power games, the Rogue Sorcerer both charismatic and opposed to certain aspects of traditional heroics – but I'd been careful never to actually hinder him in any way. I was well aware of how badly that story could turn on me if I dipped my toe in it. Apprentice was a peer in age and power, Roland was highly distinguished as both a researcher and a combat mage as well as one of the most broadly

travelled of the heroes, the Silver Huntress was a frequent leader of bands of five. All of these connections might one day be of use, to a young man with ambitions to make a name for himself.

That they were also unlikely to be connections that came around to bite either myself or my legacy in the ass was, of course, a mere fortunate coincidence.

In the distance there were sudden flashes of light that caught everyone's attention. They were coming from atop the butte on the side of the plateau, a thick pillar of stone topped by a tall watchtower that was best known by Hainaut folk as *la Veilleuse*. The prelude to our retaking of the capital had begun. A small mixed force led by Named – the White Knight, the Silent Guardian and the Vagrant Spear – would come out of the Twilight Ways, a frontline of Osenia slayers brutally scything through whatever dead held the place. In small, tight places like the halls and stairs of a watchtower I'd seen few warriors more deadly than Lady Aquiline's nimble pack of killers. Robber, who'd skirmished at their side more than once, had admitted to me that even goblins were wary of getting in close with that lot. The slayers were unusually quick, for humans, and years of monster-hunting meant that those with bad habits had already been thinned from the herd.

"Can I ask," the Squire hesitantly began, "why we are bothering to take the watchtower?"

I hesitated. Teaching that one anything would always carry risks, and as long as he didn't have a formal mentor the risks were even sharper.

"I am curious as well," the Apprentice admitted. "There are barely any dead in there, I was made to understand. Should our efforts not be concentrated on the gates?"

I decided, after a heartbeat, that shared curiosity diluted this to an acceptable level.

"The gates are what we're aiming at by taking the *Veilleuse*," I said. "It's because of the way Hainaut was built."

"There is only one way in and out of the city," Adjutant told them. "The Ivory Gates, a set of seven great gates. When the city was still inhabited they were each dedicated to allowing certain people in our out – one of the gates, the one in the middle, was even dedicated to solely the Volignacs and those they favoured."

"Very orderly," the Apprentice said, sounding pleasantly surprised. "I'd heard of the Ivory Gates in my lessons, but the Rogue Sorcerer never mentioned this."

Ashurans, I thought with distaste. I expected they wouldn't even mind the Hells too much, if they were set up with proper citizenship tiers and open for trade.

"The city was built with the expectation it would have to be held against raids and armies," I said. "So beyond the natural defences the ancient Volignacs laboured on the land some. It used to be that the slope going up to the walls and the gates was relatively even all around, but over the years they dug a much steeper slope and left just a broad ramp going up to the gates. Actually taking this city, when it's being defended, is bloody work. I'm told the last time the Princes of Arans tried to storm this place, the Volignacs just pushed great round boulders over the walls and let Creation do the rest."

Both young heroes winced at the thought. Yeah, even I had been impressed by that particular historical anecdote. It was typical of the line, apparently. House Volignac was noticeably poorer in coin and manpower than all three of its neighbouring royal rivals, but it'd not lost a significant amount of land to any of them in about a century. As far as I could tell, they'd remained in power largely by being utterly savage at anyone who crossed their borders while simultaneously marrying into the royal houses that were enemies to their enemies.

"That's almost in the same league as Summerholm," the Squire said, visibly impressed.

"No," I replied, shaking my head. "It's significantly inferior, and that's actually what got Princess Julianne Volignac – Princess Beatrice's sister and predecessor – killed. Those gates and that path are the *only* way in and out of the city. So when the dead broke the Iron Prince's defensive line up north and poured into the central valley, the city was a nightmare to evacuate."

Hainaut city wasn't that large by Proceran standards, maybe sixty to seventy thousand people, but that was a *lot* of scared civilians wanting to keep their earthly possessions going through the same cramped streets to reach the same seven measly gates. The way Klaus Papenheim told it, at the height of the panic it had taken literal days to get a cart from the centre of the city to the Ivory Gates. People had slept in the streets instead of their homes so no one would take their place while they were gone.

"Julianne Volignac rode out with most of her mounted retinue to buy enough time for her people to flee," Adjutant soberly said. "Not a single horseman from that charge returned."

That put a bit of pall on the mood, so I moved on quickly.

"Essentially, going up that ramp and taking the gates from Keter would be a messy business," I said. "The moment our presence was revealed, the dead moved most of their garrison to defend those gates and the plaza behind them. While we *could* use the Ways to enter the city directly, the Dead King has proved in the past that he's capable of putting a temporary lock on gating in the region so it'd be a risk – it could close after our vanguard got through and then the troops would be stuck in the middle of an enemy-held city."

"I still do not see the use of taking the watchtower," the Apprentice admitted.

"The upper half of the tower," I told her, "is significantly higher than the rest of the capital."

Arthur Foundling started.

"Engines," he said. "You had siege engines moved in through the Ways as well as the soldiers."

I smiled. Clever boy.

"Before long our sappers will have them in place and we will be able to begin firing," I confirmed. "Straight into the undead so very tightly packed into the plaza right behind the gates."

The enemy had meant to make that place into a meat grinder that it would cost us dearly to clear, focusing on causing damage to our army rather than defending the city properly since the garrison the Dead King had left in here was simply too small to hold it against us. We'd been disinclined to allow that, though the watchtower tactic had actually been suggested by Lady Aquiline. Girl had a knack for sliding the knife in where it hurt, couldn't deny that. Dominion leadership was coming along nicely in some ways, and I suspected that after all this should some Arlesite princes try their hand at a border war with Levant they would be in for a rude awakening. The Blood hadn't stayed in charge of Levant as long as it had by being slow to learn lessons.

"What happens if they then retreat into the city itself?" the Apprentice asked. "Would it not be hard fighting to clear the capital street by street?"

"To some extent, but less than you believe," Hakram told her. "If they abandon the Ivory Gates then we will take them, and the moment we do sending soldiers into the city through gates is no longer as risky."

"Ah," the Apprentice murmured. "Because even if the ritual lock is deployed, the forces in the city will be able to reinforce the vanguard by foot."

I nodded in approval. That was pretty much it. If the enemy dug in further into the city, using street barricades and ambushes, we could essentially overturn that entire set of tactic by gating in soldier behind the chokepoints they were trying to hold against us and striking at them from the back.

"It seems like a flawless strategy," the Squire admitted.

I winced.

"Don't say that," I said, and he jumped in surprise. "*Never* say that."

"I... apologize, Your Majesty?" he tried.

"There's no surer way to get Fate to piss on your plans than calling them infallible," I sharply said. "I once saw the Tyrant of Helike tip a winning fight the other way just by boasting about how godsdamned invincible he was."

The little bastard had done it on purpose, but the point stood.

"Same goes for you," I told the Apprentice, tone softening. "You lot won't get your knuckles rapped as immediately as a villain making the same boast would, but there's a reason that most heroes are intimately familiar with the concept of tragic irony."

They both mumbled chastened agreements, and for a moment the entire situation felt like some sort of fever dream I'd stumbled into. Hakram, ever a prince among men, delivered me from that unsettling sensation.

"We're due for a show soon, so I'd keep your eyes on the sky," Adjutant gravelled. "Our ram is about to strike."

I cocked my head to the side, taking a sniff from the air, and nodded in agreement. Yeah, I could feel it too. Like a storm in the making.

"I'd not heard about the Volignac men taking siege weapons with them," Arthur said, sounding surprised. "The opposite, in fact. The sappers were vocally disapproving."

Which usually meant insulting deeply limericks, if they were feeling nice.

"While I mean no insult to the siegecraft of the Army of Callow, rams and trebuchets won't dent a structure enchanted the way the Ivory Gates were," the Apprentice said. "I am told the foundational enchantments were laid by the famous wizard Yvon de Grandpré himself. The gates were made beyond decay and strength of arms, Your Majesty, so mere engines could do nothing."

She paused.

"Unless the Rogue Sorcerer is sent out," Sapan added. "He *is* a noted spellbreaker."

"The enchantments don't actually make the gate unbreakable, Apprentice," I noted.

In the abstract, according to Trismegistan principles it was possible to achieve but the degree of power and precision required would be impossible. Akua had noted that 'physical invincibility', as she had termed it, would require an empire's worth of sorcery simply to empower a handkerchief. And that was just the formula itself, never touching the trickier issue of materials: almost every substance known to us would shatter under that kind of strain, or some cases be outright disintegrated. And while Jaquinite magic did work in some wonky and counter-intuitive ways – it was godsdamned ridiculous that imitating the cadence and syllables of certain passages of the Book of All Things should empower and stabilize a spell – its fundamental limits weren't actually too different from those of Trismegistan sorcery.

"There's protections against entropies – rust, erosion, rot – and the centrepiece is the famous 'dual enchantment' that made Yvon famous," I said.

Famous mostly to avid scholars of magic, but I did have a distressing amount of those in my circle of closest friends.

"The strengthening of material and the reflection of force," Apprentice admiringly said.

Basically what good ol' Yvon whatshisname had done was he'd made the gates and surrounding stonework denser than those materials actually were, which in practice made them much tougher. But that wouldn't be enough to actually stop something like, say, a wyrm if the construct decided it *really* wanted to go through those gates. So another enchantment, bound to the other one – that was the impressive part, supposedly, since it ensured that since the magics were linked they'd never clash and erode at each other – had been laid that reflected physical impacts when they struck at the Ivory Gates. There was a hard limit to how much power could be reflected, but it's still been very clever: a trebuchet stone tossed at the Ivory Gates would actually lose a lot of its momentum from the reflection, so it wouldn't be powerful enough to dense the denser materials.

It also gave a pale sheen to the materials when they were touched by light at certain angles, which had earned them the eventual name of 'Ivory Gates'.

Masego had noted the pairing to be quite clever, allowing the enchantments to effectively replicate the effects of much stronger spells for significantly less power expended – meaning

there'd be a lot less decay in the magic over the years. The enchantments would have faded some over the years, of course, that was their nature. It was why both Praesi and my people usually preferred wards when it came to permanent defences. Wards were a set boundary forcing certain properties onto Creation and requiring a physical anchor, but they were also static. So long as the anchor was undamaged, any idiot with magic could add magic into the wards to keep them going. Enchantments, on the other hand, were an investment of sorcery into matter to achieve specific properties. Eventually that initial investment of sorcery would fade, and while the enchantment could be restored by another mage it was kind of like repainting a faded painting.

Unless you had a mage of similar or superior talent who understood exactly how that initial enchantment worked and what it meant to do, then there were going to be imprecisions and those were going to keep accumulating and diluting the original effect.

"Yup," I said. "We figure that since it's been about two hundred years since those enchantments were laid there's got to be at least six to ten major imprecisions from patch-up jobs by other wizards. Most of those are bound to be centred about the 'reflection' enchantment, since it's the most abstract and difficult of the two."

"You lost me some time back, Your Majesty," the Squire admitted.

Fair enough. At his age I'd not more or less fuck all about magic too. The wind began to pick up around us, as far away in the distant sky red eddies of power rippled. Among them I could see a faint dot around which the eddies were concentrated.

"There we go," I said, pointing at the dot. "Here's our ram."

"Nothing that small could break the gates," the Apprentice skeptically said.

The Squire laughed.

"I'd heard about this," Arthur Foundling said. "But I didn't actually think it was true."

The heroine shot him an irritated look and I took pity on her.

"It's not a thing," I said. "It's a person."

She started in surprise.

"That's insane, who could actually-"

The eddies of pulsing red contracted, spinning on themselves, and with a deafening detonation the Mirror Knight was shot down at the Ivory Gates at a speed that would have been enough to shred

most Named to pieces. Unfortunately we didn't have a great angle from where we stood, so we didn't get to see him hit the gates, but there was a heartbeat of silence and then a detonation even louder than the last as all seven of the Ivory Gates went up in a cloud of stone and smoke and power.

"What?" Sapan croaked out. "*What?*"

"The Mirror Knight has an aspect related to reflection," I mildly said. "So when that nifty little enchantment reflects force outwards, it just goes right back."

"That was enough for an explosion?" the Squire asked, impressed.

"Aspects are finicky creatures, as you will learn," Adjutant gravelled. "In this case, after study the Grey Pilgrim determined that not only does the aspect slightly raises force before reflecting it but, by one of those caprices of Names, it counts every 'threat' individually."

We'd lost Arthur again, but the young girl gasped.

"Yeah," I coldly smiled. "So each of those patch-up jobs tacked onto that original reflection enchantment counted like a different 'threat' to reflect, and since they all drew on the same investment of power the Mirror Knight ended up hitting maybe six seven times harder than he should have because of that heartbeat of reflection games. Comparable to being hit by a mountain in the shape of a man, I'm told."

So Christophe de Pavanie had shredded the enchantment trying to contain him with that excess of force, which in turn had unwoven the enchantment that was bound to that reflection enchantment – the density one. With that suddenly coming loose, massive force and a bunch of sorcery bursting out the results were the plume of smoke and gravel going the better part of a mile upwards.

"That's really neat," the Squire said.

"And completely *insane*," the Apprentice heatedly added.

"Look, over the years a lot of people are going to tell you that *something* always wins," I said. "Power, cleverness, brute strength, preparations. And it's all bullshit."

I jutted a thumb at the desolation we'd dealt in about the time it took to boil a kettle of water.

"That looks like the work of two Named," I said, "but that's all it is, a look. It took half a dozen people to achieve that. The Mirror Knight and the Witch of the Woods went through the fact, but behind that? It was the Pilgrim that figured out the peculiarities of the aspect. It was the Rogue Sorcerer that was

familiar with the enchantments, and the Hierophant that ran the numbers so we were sure that the gates would be smashed without it killing the Mirror Knight. And it's not just Named, either."

I leaned forward.

"Princess Beatrice was the one who was able to tell us how many times the enchantments would have gotten worked on, and how good the wizards paid for would have been," I said. "Without that, the rest was just air."

"So what *does* win?" Arthur Foundling quietly asked.

"Nothing," I said. "There is no single thing that gets you there, Squire. No one has the skills to do it all on their own – even my teacher, a man who spent his entire life learning how to twist and turn stories, got his heart ripped out in the Free Cities because he was facing someone who just... knew more. You want to know what the trick is?"

I shrugged.

"Don't do it alone."

I gestured at the smoke again.

"See, maybe I could have battered down those gates using Night," I said, "and maybe the Witch of the Woods could have ripped them off the ground, tossed them up in the sky. Maybe the White Knight could have carved his way through with Light, or the Rogue Sorcerer broken the enchantments and so an assault could follow. All of those answers, though, would have cost us in some way."

I forced myself to refocus on the pair instead of simply the orphan watching me as if spellbound, the Ashuran mage studying me closely as well.

"So instead half a dozen people sat down, kids," I told them, "and talked. Shared skills, shared powers, shared knowledge. And then we smashed those fucking gates without losing a single soldier."

I let that sink in for a moment.

"It's a big world," I said. "There's more than one pair of shoulders keeping it from falling. You don't have to do it all alone."

In the distance, a banner rose. A golden griffin rampant on blue, crowned by three golden daffodils. And under the ancient banner of House Volignac boots hit the ground at the bottom of the ramp leading up to the smoking gates, the men and women who'd fled this place with bitter tears three years ago returning to the city they had lost.

Swords cleared scabbards, glimmering under the sun, and with a roar the last soldiers of Hainaut came home.

—

We held the city by midafternoon.

There were still undead in hiding, waiting to serve as spies and inside forces when the Dead King came to besiege us, but the streets were ours and we were combing the capital for the infiltrators house by house. When it'd become clear the fight was over the dead had turned to sabotage, lighting fires and fouling the Bassin Gris, but it'd been nothing unexpected. There'd been fires when the capital was first taken, so the most flammable of the neighbourhoods had already gone up in flames and the humid summer air meant it was not easy for the arson to spread. As for the great pool of water, we'd put our mages to purifying it under Hierophant and already there'd been measurable success. With constant rotations of mages for the ritual, Zeze was confident that by dawn the pool would be fully restored.

Princess Beatrice gallantly offered to cede me the right to live in the ancient palace of her house, as I was the highest ranking noble and officer in the city, but I declined. I'd rather let her savour the comeback, and besides the place was too large for my comfort. I'd rather a smaller, more easily defensible place I could cover in layers of wards. I put Robber on the task, shaking him loose from Pickler – who was designing a replacement for the Ivory Gates with Akua and Roland as designated magical specialists – and was rather pleased with what he found me. It was a large guildhouse for what had been a guild of cheesemongers, with a small adjoining estate and two side wings. Well-located, in the southeast of the city but not too close or too far from the water.

Adjutant had begun rustling up mages to install wards and organizing guard watches before Robber even told me of the place, so I left it in his hands and instead headed to the open plaza that Princess Beatrice had suggested as the most fitting location for a Twilight Gate being raised. It'd been a good pick, exactly as the princess had described: Althazac Square was large and about as square-like as the name claimed. More importantly, it was located at the confluence of four major avenues, including the great street that circled through most of the capital like an unfinished ring. Supply wagons would be able to flow in without getting stuck in sidestreets. I sent a runner to give me agreement to the location, hoping the Blessed Artificer would be as up to it as she believed she would be.

I'd wanted Roland to be the one opening a gate, but he'd been quite firm in declining. Something about his talents being poorly suited to it. He'd seemed genuinely worried about the outcome, so

I'd let it go. Masego and I had already forged a gate together and the Ways got... snippy when you tried to do it more than once, so like it or not Adanna of Smyrna was our best bet. I sent for her and we were discussing how long it would take her to begin the attempt – apparently a lot less than anticipated if healing priests and the Pilgrim leant a hand – when warning horns were sounded from the very same watchtower we'd taken that morning. An army approaching, it meant. I left the Artificer to it and saddled my horse, riding for the closest rampart and intercepting a report on my way. It was not an enemy army, I learned, but a surprise nonetheless. The Fourth Army, which should be at the Cigelin Sisters right now, had emerged from the Twilight Ways and was now approaching at a brisk pace.

That much was already unexpected, but even more so a particular detail I picked out after limping my way to the edge of the rampart. There was a banner flying above the advancing vanguard of the Fourth that I knew well, for it was my own – the Sword and Crown. That was not unusual, as every host within the Army of Callow had received one such standard when first founded. This wasn't a standard, though, but a formal banner.

Aside from me there was exactly one person alive that had the right to fly it, and her name was Vivienne Dartwick.

Chapter 73: Signs

*There's nothing impressive about oracles, Chancellor.
All that's needed to foretell the future is a fool and a
tiger pit."*

– Dread Emperor Malignant III

I'd never seen Vivienne in armour before.

Mind you, she wasn't exactly barded for war and wearing full plate. She'd put on a blue riding dress, then accentuated that with a good steel breastplate topped by matching spaulders and a loose gorget. She'd not bothered with a tasset to cover thighs, preferring only a broad belt, and the lack of greaves and gauntlets softened the look. It was a good choice, I'd decided. Playing the warrior queen outright would not have suited her, but a martial touch that added to her increasingly regal manners would toe the line just right. It was a reminder that she might not be a soldier, but that she'd ridden out some of the worst scraps the Woe had ever been in without being dead weight. Considering Vivienne had spent most of her adult life wearing loose leathers and treading rooftops without ever developing an interest in fashion that I'd noticed, I could only praise whoever it was in her service that'd made the suggestion.

"Too much?" Vivienne asked, taking off her riding gloves.

Dry as the tone had been, I suspected that the slight undertone of abashment I'd picked up there wasn't just me looking for pearls in a pigsty.

"It suits," I replied, shaking my head. "And I notice you made sure you'd be able to fight if you had to."

The riding dress wouldn't mess up her footing too much, and she was a nimble one even without a Name to heighten the talent. I did not hide my approbation. There was no call to ever feel safe north of Salia, no matter what we liked to pretend.

"It's the classic Summerholm cut," she told me, sounding amused at my ignorance.

I snorted. Yeah, if there was one city in Callow where there'd it's be a fashion staple to be able to fight in your dress it'd be the Gate of the East. I probably would have had to learn about this stuff if I'd ever held a proper court, with all the attached feasts and festivals and formal receptions that involved, but my kingdom had half on fire and on permanent war footing from pretty much the moment the crown was set on my brow. Mind, you as the daughter of a minor baron who'd held the title mostly in name since the Conquest it wasn't like Vivienne would have been swimming in new dresses. It'd been a wealthy of upbringing, but that wealth had begun dwindling before she was ever born and the noble title had, as determined by Tower law after the Conquest, died with her father. There was a reason I'd had to raise her back to the formal Callowan peerage.

Black had preferred leaving my people's nobility to wither on the vine with their titles intact rather than strip those outright, you see. It was less likely to lead to conspiracies, with all those suddenly landless knights and barons instead worrying about how they were going to pay for the upkeep of those mansions my father had so *mercifully* left them to own.

"The cloak goes with everything," I shrugged. "What more do I need to know?"

"I still remember when you avoided wearing black like the plague," Vivienne smiled. "How the times have changed."

I grimaced, as this was a bit of a sore spot. I'd gotten used to the darker colours, in truth, but I did still have the occasional craving for a pretty sundress or a tunic in a tone you'd seen on a rainbow that'd not been cursed by some fucking warlock. The trouble was that the 'Black Queen' couldn't be seen wearing those things, it'd take a bite into a reputation that'd come in too useful too many times for me to be able to justify wearing a dress that'd not been rolled in a barrel of soot beforehand.

"When I retire," I told her feelingly, "I will wear nothing but pastels for a year. I solemnly swear."

"I'll look forward to the Mirror Knight expounding on how the pink dress is really a hint of your many perfidies to come," she snickered.

We shared a moment of quiet amusement at the thought. I'd seen precious little of ol' Christophe, as it happened. The White Knight had not been softhanded in making it clear that he'd disgraced himself, which had seen his popularity dry out some. Even those who would have been inclined to still lean his way had been kept away by the neat trick of there being no one really willing to argue with the Peregrine when he told you to go away. Tariq was proving a finer check on the Mirror Knight than I'd anticipated, though I still had to wonder if even the Grey Pilgrim was going to be enough to set that man straight. The chuckles faded, though, and I did not resume banter. It was Vivs here, not an officer or a ally, so I didn't bother with subtlety.

"Why are you here, Vivienne?" I bluntly asked.

"Always a pleasure to see you too, Catherine," she replied.

The way she tucked in that perfectly fine milkmaid's braid told me that, once more, she was a little more nervous than her tone and face would imply.

"Don't give me that," I dismissed. "You know well that the only reason I could even spare you from your duties in Salia was because we need you with some battle honours to your name before you succeed me. I'm happy to see you, Vivs, but we're not really in a time and place where happy's what takes the day."

"I know," she admitted with a grimace. "And the truth is, my reasons for coming are thinner than I'd like. I take it this is just going to be the two of us?"

She gestured at the solar around us, situated in the same guildhall that Robber had found me hours earlier. Adjutant had accurately deduced that I'd want this solar – nice windows but not too large, sun-facing and with room enough inside for multiple desks and chairs – for my own and made warding it with our usual suite of protection a priority. He was still arranging the last details for the rest of my new lodgings and headquarters, but he'd be on his way soon.

"Hakram's coming as soon as he can," I told her. "Zeze's got duties for a while still, and I left word for Indrani but I've no idea where she is in the city."

Hunting for undead, I suspected. It was all a little too cat and mouse for my own tastes, but Archer had always liked a hunt and

Keter's last infiltrators made for interesting – if not overly dangerous to a Named – quarry.

"I was asking whether you wanted to bring in allied commanders, actually," Vivienne said, "but I suppose you answered the question regardless."

I shrugged. I wasn't going to keep anything from them unless there was a call for it but I felt no need to include them into what was, on the surface, a purely Callowan matter. Both the Fourth Army and Vivienne herself were of my lot, it was to myself they answered first and foremost. Being in the room for this conversation was not a courtesy I felt I owed them.

"You were meant to command the troops at the defensive line down south," I noted. "If General Abigail did take the Cigelin Sisters-"

"She did," Vivienne confirmed. "It was a rout. The Tyrant's Own under General Pallas baited the dead out of the defences with a feigned retreat, and when the battle was engaged the fantassins under her command found a way through the hills the dead hadn't. They were struck in the sides as well, and their lines collapsed. Some five thousand withdrew, and the relief force the Dead King sent decided not to risk taking back the Sisters from her."

Huh, fancy that. My nervy little general had come through once more. I'd expected a victory out of her, but this was more decisive than I'd anticipated.

"Good, then we should be establishing contact soon," I grunted. "Doesn't explain why you're here and not commanding the Deoraithe and levies that we funnelled up to hold the defensive line."

The Daoine troops I trusted to handle themselves, but Proceran levies had a nasty tendency to run when things got rough. Wasn't some deep moral flaw, even if some of my soldiers like to pretend otherwise, but more or less what you should expect when you put a spear in a shoemaker's hands and told him to fight something like beorn.

"The Augur believed that if I was not here by the moon's turn, and the Fourth with me, then Procer would fall within the year," Vivienne bluntly said. "The Astrologer wasn't quite so sure, but she agreed that the storm about to come for Hainaut is going to be a horror and the signs are largely against us."

"The Augur can't see the Dead King," I pointed out. "Or myself, for that matter."

She could also be outmanoeuvred, as Black had proved during his ill-advised Proceran campaign. Her long-term predictions tended

to be vague and her shot-term ones only mattered when they got where they needed to be in time for them to be useful.

"The First Prince saw fit to reveal that the Augur been working with the Forgetful Librarian to find a way around her blind spots," Vivienne said. "It's a process of elimination, or at least Hasenbach hinted as much. Every time I'm not here before the whiteout, after it the Hainaut front collapses."

I frowned.

"The whiteout?"

"All our prophets encountered something similar," Vivienne said. "Trying to peer into what happens during the coming battle here is somehow blinding for oracles. They've theorized it's because there are too many entities involved who resist or outright muddle foretelling."

Huh. I supposed we had gathered a significant amount of Named, which would pretty much twist Fate into a knot. On top of that there were Choirs involved – at least Mercy, possibly Judgement if it triumphed over the Hierarch at a critical moment – here on the Dead King and my own's ability to screw with predictions. That was a lot of moving parts for a mortal oracle, maybe more than they would be able to physically comprehend all at once.

"The Astrologer insists that the stars indicate the Gigantes will be critical in what is to come," Vivienne added, "but that one might be muddled. She's also sure they'll be crucial to something in Twilight's Pass, and there's barely any of them there."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"I wasn't aware there were any at all," I said.

"Hasenbach wrangled further concessions out of them through the Dominion," Vivienne said. "She had to first get the Highest Assembly to vote a formal apology to the Titanomachy for the Humbling of Titans, though, which cost her some support in the south. Among her prizes is that the Gigantes sent a group to fortify the Morgentor, with an eye to doing the same to the rest of the fortresses in the pass."

Well worth some Arlesite grumbling, in my opinion, but then I wasn't the one that had to keep the shitshow known as the Highest Assembly in a semblance of functioning order. Somehow I suspected that if we'd not cooperated to let that same Assembly try the Red Axe for attempted regicide Hasenbach would have had a harder time getting that vote passed. It was easier to get princes to bend their proud necks when you'd proved you were willing to cross Named to protect their lives.

"We do have Gigantes in the city," I said, "mind you, at the moment they should-"

The air shuddered, and for a moment it was as if all the world had gone still. As if I was a fly caught in amber, as if all the empty spaces of Creation had chillingly filled. And when that power released me, as primordially indifferent as the wave that could guide the sailor ashore or drown him, I found myself gasping as I leaned against the table. Vivienne was looking at me in a panic, already on her feet.

"Cat, are you all right?" she asked, taking my arm and supporting me.

I closed my eyes, focusing on breathing in and out. The urge to empty my stomach passed.

"I'm fine," I got out.

"You're not *fine*," Vivienne bit back angrily.

I gently pushed her away, still leaning against the table slightly.

"I'm not being stubborn, it passed," I said. "And it won't happen again."

Blue-grey eyes examined me, as if looking for a lie.

"You didn't feel that?" I asked her.

Slowly she shook her hand.

"Feel what?"

"I'm guessing," I sighed, "that was my first taste of what Gigantes spellsinging feels like for someone... attuned to the parts of Creation I am."

"Bad?" Vivienne quietly asked.

"What the Witch of the Woods does is a pale imitation," I ruefully said. "They tap into something larger, Vivienne. It was like standing next to Sve Noc if they were losing their temper, but less... targeted."

Masego has once called the godhead a trick of perspective, as the Hierophant's eyes had always seen further than those of other men. I'd once *been* such a trick, when I had scavenged my way to rule over Winter, but it'd been blind flailing. It was not without reason that the Dead King had described my apotheosis as 'accidental' when we'd first met in Keter. These days I could touch those deeper rules on occasion, as I had at the Second Battle of Lauzon's Hollow, but my understanding was limited and

the use was rough on me. What the Gigantes had just done – and it must be them, for no one else in the city should be capable of this – had... ridden such rules, for lack of a better term. Like a ship on the tide, using the sea without mastering it. It was not they way I did it at all, but that I had the capacity in the first place must have been enough to make me... sensitive.

Hierophant would have been as well, I figured, but no one else in Hainaut.

"I'll be ready next time," I told Vivienne. "It was the surprise that left me vulnerable."

Like a sucker punch in the gut, though they'd probably not meant it to be.

"Perhaps they could be prevailed upon to give warning, next time," she mildly said.

"Yeah, I'll ask the White Knight to pass the request along," I softly laughed. "Shit, it's been a while since something took me this badly by surprise."

An overdue reminder, perhaps. It was a big world, and I'd not seen all there was to see in even my little corner of it. We resumed the conversation until Hakram joined us, but there really wasn't much to add to what she'd already said. Vivienne had come to the capital with the Fourth largely on the word of the Augur and the Astrologer, and though she had freshers news than we about the going-ons in the south she truthfully didn't have much to add. She was just as lost as we were, only now in addition to our uncertainties about the defence of Hainaut there was a hanging sword above our head to remind us that oracles were pretty sure if we lost here the entire war was lost. Lovely.

At least we had Vivienne with us, so even at the bottom of this freshly dug pit things were looking up.

—

There was need for a war council, as there so often was these days, but we went about it briskly. General Bagram, a large and aging orc who'd been the right hand of Juniper's mother for decades before becoming a general in his own right under the Army of Callow, was added to that ever-expanding roster of people with a seat at the table along with my designated heiress, Lady Vivienne Dartwick. Discussions were without frills, as we all felt the invisible noose of Keter's advance tightening around our necks, and there were few arguments. Given the very real possibility that we were going to lose either the gates or the walls at some point, Princess Beatrice gave formal permission to my sappers to prepare the streets to repel invasion. Pickler was

still busy replacing the Ivory Gates, but no doubt she'd be delighted when informed.

Quartering was revised to accommodate the addition of the Fourth Army, which had blessedly come with an overfill of supplies that'd allow us to avoid rationing before the first supply wagons arrived through the Ways. I'd been right twofold, as it turned out: it'd been the Gigantes that had startled me, and the gate they'd helped the Blessed Artificer make was already technically finished. It was recommended it still go unused until dark, though, as apparently the parts where they had *melted* the veil between the Twilight Ways and Creation were still 'cooling off'. Fucking Hells, the more I learned about Ligurian sorcery the more it fucking terrified me. And Triumphant had gone toe to toe with those people at their peak? Gods, what an utter monster that one must have been.

By sundown we all left the palace that Beatrice Volignac seemed so deeply happy to have reclaimed, most of the practicalities of our defence hammered out into a working shape. It was the Pilgrim and the White Knight who reached out to me afterwards, though, to arrange a formal council of Named as well.

"It can be considered a given that every Revenant in the principality, including the Scourges, is now headed our way," Tariq said. "We need to prepare accordingly."

"Agreed," I said. "We need to divide our people into bands. And more importantly-"

"Your insistence that a band of five needs to be sent after the bridge immediately," Hanno frowned. "Yes, I was told of it."

"A heroic band of five," I said. "Given the steep odds and how it'll be impossible to really prepare, it's the only setup with a chance of getting it done. And if Tariq told you about that, then he told you I'd like for you to lead it."

It'd be a loss, because the White Knight took to most Revenants like a sickle to wheat, but I had doubts about any band led by a lesser hero succeeding. The Grey Pilgrim might make it as well, maybe, but Tariq always shone most when he was in a supporting role and that would muddle things up some.

"To clarify," the White Knight mildly said, "on the eve of a battle prophesized to be decisive for this entire war, you request that I leave."

"Yes," I bluntly said, "and the Witch as well, you'll need her."

A light touch on my arm interrupted me, and I turned to find Vivienne cocking an eyebrow.

"I will leave the three of you to your conversation," she easily said, "but if I might make a suggestion?"

She gestured at our surroundings, namely the now dead gardens leading up to the front gates of the Volignac family palace.

"There are perhaps more appropriate venues for you all to talk," Vivienne finished.

"Common sense," Tariq ruefully murmured. "Such a rare, precious thing. My thanks, Lady Dartwick."

"I still feel the urge to take to rooftops on moonlit nights," she replied, "so do not bestow upon me a surfeit of honours, Peregrine. Lord White, Catherine, a pleasant evening to you."

Hanno returned the courtesy, while I cocked an eyebrow at her. She had a deft hand with heroes, as she'd just reminded me. I sometimes forgot she'd been part of William's band, back in the day, and had been a decent fit there from what little I knew. Heroes tended to be split between those who considered her a fallen heroine, just punished by Above in the form of losing her Name, or those who essentially considered her a retired heroine who'd embraced other duties. Tariq tended to lean that way, though I'd never quite been able to pin down Hanno on the subject.

"I'll see you later," I told her. "It's been too long."

"Agreed," she feelingly replied. "I'll try to see if I can rustle up Indrani from whatever winesink she'll have stumbled into by now."

"Don't bribe her with my liquor cabinet this time," I warned, "it's impossible to get the good stuff this far out, and..."

I suddenly coughed, feeling the distinctly amused gazes of two of the most prominent heroes of the age as I argued with the heiress to Callow about the fate of my booze stash.

"Carry on," I said, vainly trying to claw back a bit of gravitas.

It, er, might take a while. Vivienne took her leave and I went for a walk through a garden of dead things with the Pilgrim and the Knight. To my surprise, I found the sight oddly troubling. I'd thought myself well acquainted with death, for how could I not be? I'd waded through it on too many battlefields to count, and thrice I'd come close to staying in those cold arms forever. I'd deal it out and suffered it, used it as a tool and flinched from it. If my throne had been set upon a foundation of anything, death was it. And still, limping through the garden, some part of me was dismayed. It was all dead. Ever tree gone grey, ever flower wilted every blade of grass frayed. Black earth had gone

fallow, covered by dead leaves and insects forever still. This wasn't the coming of winter or even some black tragedy. Intent had done this. Thorough, patient intent to kill every living thing there was to kill.

There was bare, graven beauty to the garden that felt like a knot in my throat. Was this the world the Dead King wanted? A field of grey from shore to shore, so utterly barren that even the sea grew lifeless lapping at it. I forced myself to set aside the thought. Stroking the thought of failure instead of tending to the needs of the moment was as good a way to see them turn true as any.

"It has to be you," I said, standing in the shade of a leafless tree.

"I am not certain we need to send a band at all," the White Knight calmly replied. "It would strip the defence of much-needed strength, and there will be time enough to attend the bridge after victory is secured here."

"If victory is secured here," I pointed out.

"In this, I believe the Black Queen to be correct," the Grey Pilgrim said. "We should not bet the fate of all Calernia on our ability to win in battle against the hordes of Keter. It would be dangerously irresponsible."

I nodded in appreciation at the old man's words. Not that he was speaking them for my sake – Tariq had never been shy about disagreeing with me on anything at all, to my occasional displeasure.

"It weakens our ability to win that battle to send Named away," Hanno flatly said. "In particular fighters as apt as Queen Catherine seems intent on assigning, in all humility."

"Smashing that bridge isn't going to be a pleasant autumn stroll, White," I said. "I mentioned you and the Witch of the Woods because the job needs a captain and the power to collapse a bridge. To add survivability, I'd throw in the Forsworn Healer and pack the rest of the five with one set of muscles and a specialized killer."

The kind that'd be able to kill something that couldn't be killed conventionally, like the Painted Knife or the Rogue Sorcerer.

"There I must disagree," Tariq said. "Not with the necessity of power, but with the White Knight's presence being required. His role would be better suited to a situation like the approaching battle."

Fuck, I silently thought. Part of me wanted to get snippy that the Heavens got to have two people around for this talk, but honesty compelled me to admit that there really wasn't anyone else who would have made a difference. Hanno took advice from many parts, but it was my understanding that people who could make him actually reconsider a decision were few. The Pilgrim was as close to a peer as I'd be able to rustle up in Hainaut.

"You genuinely believe in the wisdom of thinning our forces before a major engagement?" Hanno asked Tariq, frowning.

"Empty prayers birth no miracles," the Grey Pilgrim replied.

I cocked my head to the side. Huh. Yeah, that was solid *namelore* even if he was coming at it from the other way. He meant, I gathered, that for a prayer to be answered it would need to be sincere. In this case, that meant sending Named even when it would be costly. Black would have phrased it more along the lines of Creation being a machine that gave out according to what you gave it, while I myself preferred to think of it in terms of weight: you couldn't topple a wall with a pebble. If you wanted a trebuchet stone, you needed to use a trebuchet in the first place.

"That only reinforces that we *do* need to send him," I insisted. "We can't half-ass this, it'll backfire on us."

"This isn't a ritual field and we're not bleeding prisoners to make a tower fly, Your Majesty," the Pilgrim flatly replied. "There is no need to open our own throats to make this work."

I bit out the very unflattering answer I had on the tip of my tongue, as I was pretty sure he knew the *Kharsum* words for both mother and goat.

"I remain unconvinced this should be attempted at all," the White Knight said, frown deepening, "but when the two of you are in agreement you are rarely incorrect. I'll concede to sending a band, and a heroic one."

That was a start.

"I appreciate that," I said.

"But I am horrendously wrong, and you must now tell me why," Hanno drily replied, and I remembered why I liked him in the first place.

"I wouldn't go quite that far," I said, since the truth teller couldn't read me. "Look, I've seen you ride this horse before. Picking out traps with the Fortunate Fool, picking fights specifically because they put you at a disadvantage."

"Heroes placed in situations where it is possible but unlikely for them to triumph buck the odds more than they should," Hanno agreed. "It is the way of stories, and stories have power."

"But that's the thing," I said, "in those stories, you don't send some nobody to kill the dragon and win the princess' hand. Sure the guy *seems* like a nobody, but we know he's not because the story is about him. He's really a prince, or a knight, or fated in some way."

"Your argument is that we must look for a specific manner of fate, then?" Hanno curiously asked,

"No," the Grey Pilgrim quietly said. "It is that the dragon's lair is full of skeletons whose mishap was being... insufficiently fated, yes?"

"Weight," I said. "See, the bridge looks wide open right now: all armies are accounted for and far, we know where it's being built and where most of the Scourges are. But it won't actually be open."

They were both looking at me like was belabouring something very obvious, which I supposed for heroes I was. Villain lairs were always trapped and vicious, while heroes didn't really *have* those.

"So there's going to be a fight," I continued. "Which you figure you can win sending some solid heroes while keeping here our finest. That's a mistake, though, because that bridge is something that could lose us this entire war. It's the reason we began this campaign in the first place."

Hanno's eyes narrowed.

"Weight," he repeated. "You imply that if we do not send shoulders capable of bearing the burden of this entire campaign, all they will be is... skeletons in a dragon lair."

"I do," I said. "And that means it has to be you. Because pretty much the only other person in your camp with that kind of pull on the war is the Grey Pilgrim, and no offence Tariq but--"

"No, I agree I would be ill-suited to the task," the Pilgrim murmured. "Perhaps if Laurence was still with us it would have been different, two of us ancients with three younger, but as things stand the forces within the band would not be in harmony."

"So you agree," I pressed.

"I don't," Tariq replied. "You see this weight as a scale that must evened, when instead it should be seen as a crucible to help the rise of another great character. We should be discussing who

among the servants of Above in the city could benefit from this opportunity, not entertaining sending away the White Knight before a pivotal point of a crusade."

Godsdamned heroes. There was a point where optimism became delusion, and thinking every test was some sort of ladder was well past it. Sometimes you just *failed*, because you hadn't been prepared enough and you'd underestimated the foe.

"This isn't a fucking crusade, Tariq," I said, exasperated. "I know it's more comfortable for you to think about it that way, but my side of the fence is here too and *we count*. The role of a White Knight isn't the same it would be in-

"Enough," Hanno said. "I understand the need for a swift decision, but I will not let myself be strongarmed before considering this properly."

"We can't afford to wait long," I bluntly said.

"The discussion can be resumed tomorrow, after our council of Named," the White Knight said. "I will sleep on this, at the very least, and consult with others I trust."

Not what I'd wanted to hear, but I could already see that pushing any further now would just burn goodwill for no gain. I suppressed a wince, looking back on how I'd gotten drawn into an argument about 'the role of a White Knight' with the Pilgrim while said White Knight was right in front of me. Hanno was remarkably even-keeled, but that probably hadn't done me any favours. It'd been a mistake, too, since the man I actually needed to convince hadn't been the one I was arguing with. I snuck a look at Tariq. Had that been on purpose? Getting my thoughts out so the White Knight could see them splayed out without having been drawn into the thick of it.

"By all means," I said. "We can continue this when everyone's rested."

"A good evening to you, then," Hanno said, inclining his head,

I returned it, and he bade a significantly less formal goodbye to the Pilgrim. Who stayed behind, as I'd hoped he would. The two of us continued the walk towards the opposite end of the garden, his slow gait and my limp evenly matched. Neither of us pretended this was about anything but continuing the conversation that'd just abruptly ended.

"He is in a pivotal moment of his journey as one of the Bestowed, Queen Catherine," Tariq said. "Sending him away from the battle could have deleterious effects."

"Or it could be exactly what he needs, Pilgrim," I replied. "We don't *know*, either way."

"His own leanings-"

"Are a consequence of his character, not some arcane working of fate," I bluntly interrupted. "If he had some instinct niggling at him that this was a mistake I'd reconsider, but he argued based on logic. He thinks his place is here in the thick of it, herding heroes, so that's where he figures he should be."

"Because that *is* his place," Tariq just as bluntly replied. "He is the White Knight, and the hordes of Evil has come."

"Maybe that was true a century ago," I said, "but you gave me a whole speech about how he has to find a new way, Peregrine. What you're describing is more of the same."

"This new way you argue for is also *your* way, Black Queen," the old man said. "Not his. If this were his own notion I too would reconsider, but it is not."

I grimaced. Yeah, I could see that from his perspective this was meddling on my part.

"It's a strategic decision I'm pushing, not a personal or even a story one beyond my understanding of forces that need to be addressed for the operation to be a success," I said.

It wasn't exactly an apology or a justification, but it flirted enough with both he should be able to understand I wasn't unaware of where I was treading.

"I believe you to be acting in good faith," the Pilgrim acknowledged, "but that does not mean it would not lead to error."

I breathed out.

"All right," I said. "Then I'll back off and stop pushing, if you do the same."

He cocked an eyebrow, clearly less than inclined to agree. I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them. I was going to have to pay for the goods.

"I'm calling in my favour," I said.

I'd not agreed to keep an eye out for Razin and Aquiline without putting a price on it. The old man's face remained calm, but he studied me for a long moment.

"I will not argue for something I believe to be a mistake," Tariq Fleetfoot said.

"I'm only bargaining for silence," I replied.

He didn't look happy about it, but then favours weren't supposed to be things you were inclined to give in the first place.

"Then the bargain is struck," the Grey Pilgrim reluctantly said.

We shook on it, wrists clasped, and broke off the grip as we reached the end of the path.

Leaving the garden of death behind, we went into the city and instead saw to the living.

Chapter 74: Herald

"It is not the grand choices of our lives that determine who we are. It is the small acts of small days, the quiet kindnesses and cruelties, that shape us like a smith's hammer. And when those grand choices come calling we are already formed, already shaped, and we understand that it was never really a choice at all."

– King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

I'd returned to the cheesemonger guildhall with what I believed to be pretty sensible hopes.

By now Adjutant ought to have gotten the first set of wards anchored around the property and the watches set up, so I'd be able to steal a few seats and drag my friends into the solar for our first homecoming in much, much too long. A quiet evening before the storm blew in would do us all some good. Instead as I limped my way down the cobblestone road leading to the hall, cloaked under a veil of Night, I found that the place was swarming with activity. Wagons were being dragged by oxen into the estate, some filled with live chickens and the occasional goat while others were crammed fit to burst with barrels bearing the seal of my army's ale rations.

Soldiers and officers from both armies that'd come to the capital were all over the grounds, seated at tables or on dead grass, talking and drinking and eating their fill. A few pits had been dug and pigs were roasting as well as a few birds, while sergeants stood by open ale barrels and marked tankards with red stripes after filling them – making sure no one emptied a keg on the own, I figured. Magelights had been put up, hanging from ropes crisscrossing the grounds, and braziers had been spread around to beat back the coolness of the night. It looked like a festival, honestly, and pretty rowdy one.

Some fighting circles were already emerging, greenskins and humans brawling under the eager shouts and bets of their fellows,

and some mages had set up a pair of tables for an old Wasteland sparring game called *achoma* – kettleburn, in Lower Miezán. It was a Legion favourite, since all you needed to play it was six small cauldrons and five marbles. Two teams of three mages were trying to shoot the marbles into the cauldrons of the other side, using only low-grade fireball spells to both attack and defend. Anyone whose cauldron got scored on had to take a drink, which meant games tended to end with a need for healing by a still-sober practitioner.

To my amusement, I saw that some boys and girls from the House Insurgent had dragged up tables of their own and were trying to mimic the game using Light tricks instead. Mind you, what drew the crowds wasn't any of those but the unholy melding of my own people's proclivity for open-air plays and puppet shows during fairs and the goblin tradition of *takha*. A Taghreb word, that, since the Tribes had unsurprisingly never shared their own for it. It meant 'jeer' and stood for the way goblins tended to put on farces making fun of other people's traditions, typically stealing the structure of an already existing play or story and then twisting it into a parody of itself.

Blending my people's tendency for spite and the typical goblin fearlessness in mockery had birthed shows like the one I was currently looking at. They were called trick plays, or sometimes 'Barber and Edward' plays after the two characters that were a recurring motif in every show: the cunning goblin sergeant Barber, whose beauty always caused suitors to swarm after her, and morose young squire Edward, who always ended up winning and then losing a fortune before the end of the show because of his need to settle every slight. The two of them always ended up triumphing over the damned foreigners, usually by getting one of Barber's suitors killed and Edward sacrificing his latest gain to screw over his latest enemy.

And so, surrounded by a drunk and cheering crowd, half a dozen Callowans and goblins were putting up a play on a table that, by the sounds of it, claimed to be a recreation of the Princes' Graveyard. Gods, I really hoped there weren't any Procerans or Levantines around. Trick plays did tend to be harsher on nobles than soldiers, but they weren't kind on *anybody*. Not even me. In at least one of them, set after the Folly, Barber stumbled onto 'me' having nicked the standards of the Sixth Legion and painting them blue to use them for the Army of Callow, hoping no one would notice.

Which, you know, fair.

"- so we should just cut them!" a goblin wearing a tabard shouted.

Half the audience shouted it with her, as it was apparently a recurrent line, and I realized with a start that she was supposed

to be the Saint of Swords. The real laughter came when the 'Saint' turned towards the 'Pilgrim' and found him asleep again, though, having failed to notice Edward stealing his staff with the intention of pawning it off to some Procerans. It uh, wasn't an interpretation of the Graveyard real flattering to anyone who wasn't part of the Army of Callow. There was a swift scene change, with a mage tainting the magelight green instead of blue to signify it, and I was treated to the sight of the Tyrant of Helike – played by a young Liessen girl – duelling one of his own gargoyles as played by a grizzled sapper.

The both of them, I grasped from context, sought Sergeant Barber's hand in marriage. I smothered a laugh, still under my veil. The wretch would actually have gotten a kick out of that, I figured. I lingered long enough for the Tyrant and the gargoyle to defeat each other in a draw and was about to leave when the scene was changed once more and Edward ran into a cloaked shape, dropping the staff and when picking it up accidentally taking up the other person's instead when he scampered off. Wait, that was a patchwork cloak even if the colours were faded. And a *staff*?

"I swear I've seen this somewhere before," the Black Queen on the stage observed as she looked at the Pilgrim's staff, to the hooting laughter of the crowd.

My character then proceeded to go through an overlarge laundry list of foes real and imagined it could belong to, always with a second line dismissing why it couldn't be them. I couldn't help but smile when it came to the Lone Swordsman and the line went '*alas, 'tis too long a stick to have been the one up his arse*'. Meanwhile Edward, on the other side of the stage, lost 'my' staff while in a panic and began deploring his upcoming executions by various methods in between foe couplets declaimed by the Black Queen. It ended with him imploring whatever Gods might be listening to bring the staff back, which a goblin with hands painted black making crow noises seemed about to answer.

On a whim, I drew on Night and wove two shades of darkness into crows. I passed them my staff of yew and let them fly, dropping it on Edward's head. The crowd went utterly silent.

"And don't lose it this time," I sternly spoke through the Night, before unmaking the crows.

Half the actors looked like they weren't sure whether they should be awed or terrified, but the crowd was not so ambivalent: there was a deafening roar of approval, followed by cheering. The play was waylaid for a bit, and with a satisfied smirk I left them to it. I'd send someone to get the staff back later, but there was no harm in it serving as a prop for a bit. Drifting away from the crowd, my attention was caught by a figure at the outskirts of it. Wearing a hooded cloak, it was lingering at the edges and sniffing about as if looking for someone – but never actually

looking at people, as far as I could tell. The silhouette was hard to make out under the cloak, but those careful steps I knew well. I extended the Night veil to cover the both of us after hobbling close, which was nit immediately noticed.

"Taking a walk, Vivienne?" I idly asked.

She didn't start, or even look particularly surprised, which kind of took the fun out of it. Bringing down her hood, she shot me a put-upon look.

"I had people waiting for you on the road, but you never showed up," she accused.

I shrugged.

"Got curious," I said, and gestured at the festivities around us. "Your doing, I take it?"

"It's been a long war," Vivienne said. "And it'll get dangerous to cut loose when the dead start arriving."

Fair enough. I wouldn't begrudge my people a night of rejoicing, even if I'd not been the one to order it. With the supply wagons coming in through the Ways, we could afford to bite into our reserves a bit.

"It's a good call," I said. "Maillac's Boot was rough on the Third, and the Fourth has known little but Twilight and battle for a month."

"Hakram described that one as a little more than just *rough*," she grimaced. "And General Hune dying's a blow. I know you weren't close, but..."

My fingers clenched. It wasn't always about closeness or friendship. If people stuck with you through long hardships, sometimes that alone was enough to be a bond. I'd trusted Hune, even while aware her allegiance was not deep, because I'd known her in ways I now knew the leading figures of the Army of Callow less and less. The circle that'd come up with me through the ranks was dying off.

"If we look back, all there is to find is ghosts," I quietly said. "Forward we go, lest they catch up."

The sounds and lights of the feast reached us through the veil of Night, muted as if belonging to another realm entirely. I sighed.

"I need a drink," I said.

"That I can provide," Vivienne amusedly said. "Brought a crate of Vale summer wine, too."

"You give the best bribes," I praised.

"You're just a cheap date," she snorted, linking her arm with mine. "Even the wakeleaf's not that expensive, for a royal vice."

I smiled, both at the repartee and the subtle way she'd made herself into a support for my bad leg now what that I'd leant out my staff.

"You've seen the treasury, Viv," I drawled, "if I were an expensive drunk, Mercantis would own the country by now."

"I like to think that, as a kingdom, we could afford to help you drown yourself in at least second-rate wines," Vivienne solemnly replied. "That it what it means to be a patriot, Catherine."

My lips quirked. I'd missed this more than I'd realized. Even after we'd settled some of the tensions between us at the Arsenal, there'd not been much time to spend together. And while most of the Woe had been with the army since the campaign began, I'd spent most of my hours in war councils, fighting or scheming – with a lot less of a reprieve for sleeping than was probably healthy. It was Hakram I'd seen the most, and over the last few months that relationship had grown... complicated in ways it'd not been when we were younger. From the corner of my eye I noted we were drawing away from the lights, past the guildhall itself and into the adjoining property.

"So where is it you're taking me?" I asked.

"We made a fire," she easily said. "Indrani found a good place and Hakram gathered everyone."

My steps stuttered. Even leaning against her arm that led to a painful twinge, so I pull Night from the veil to smooth the sensation away as I gathered myself.

"Cat, are you all right?" Vivienne asked.

I nodded jerkily, righting myself up. I couldn't quite grasp why that had blindsided me so much. It was the first night in ages we were all in the same place, it was only natural we'd have a fire. If I'd not been busy speaking the White Knight and the Pilgrim, I would likely have arranged one myself. Maybe that was it, I thought. Had we ever had one of these without my arranging it before? I couldn't recall a single instance. It wasn't like I should feel insulted by this, and I didn't, it was just... I breathed out, somehow gladdened and saddened at the same time.

"You don't usually keep your thoughts to yourself like this," Vivienne said.

She tried to make the tone a teasing one, but it did not seep all the way through. I was smelling smoke and our steps had brought out as the edge of a cove of dead trees and skeletal bushes, so we couldn't be far. I could almost see the fire's light, the shadows it cast against the darkness.

"You ever feel like the world's passing you by?" I quietly asked.

Our steps slowed, and she slid her arm out of mine. Smoke came on the wind, and the distant sound of talk and laughter. I could see the edges of the warm light, licking at the dark we were still cloaked in. It touched the side of Vivienne's face, framing its shape. The dainty nose and heart-shaped chin, the cheeks that had lost some of the hollowness they'd born when she was still the Thief. And those piercing blue-grey eyes, considering me in silence.

"I used to," she said, leaning back against the tree. "After joining the Woe. I didn't know it, at first, because there were always so many things to learn, to do, to see. But it sunk, in eventually."

"Not anymore, though?"

She smiled.

"I figured out what I want to do," Vivienne said. "It was easier, before we met. I didn't need to think, not really – I knew the Lone Swordsman was a hero, so his cause was just. If I fought for that cause then, I would be just as well. There was no need to look further."

"A lot of the things he wanted were good," I softly admitted. "I just didn't think his way of getting them would work."

"That's always the trouble, isn't?" Vivienne ruefully smiled. "The means. Everyone likes the dream, but no one can agree on how to get there."

"Didn't you?" I asked.

She snorted, shook her head.

"I know I want to see our home safe and happy and prosperous," Vivienne said. "And I figured out, before it was too late, that being the Thief wasn't going to help me with any of it. Once I knew who I wasn't, it just... didn't seem to matter as much that I didn't know who I was."

She leaned her head back, against the bark, looking up at the night sky.

"I wasn't going against the current anymore," she murmured. "I wasn't drowning."

Though her lips quirked into a smile, it was mirthless.

"Hakram saved my life, that night where he cut off his hand," Vivienne said. "He shocked me out the nightmare. And every time I felt the urge to go back, to dismiss it, I saw the blood again. The bone and the flesh. And words can lie, Cat, but not those."

We let the silence lie between us for a moment, almost comfortable.

"I don't think I can do this for strangers," I quietly admitted. "Maybe when I was young and it still burned in me, the knowledge that I was *right* and I was going to *fix it*... maybe back then it was enough, just the principles. The ideal. But now it's the people that bear me through it, and with every year there's a few less."

My fingers clenched.

"You are bearing me through this," I said, "and it is breaking your backs."

And at the end of the road, what will I find? I did not voice did, did not dare to, but terror coiled in my guts like a snake as the thought came unbidden. *A world of strangers, and a graveyard where everyone I ever loved lies sleeping the dreamless sleep.* Vivienne learned forward and slowly reached up her hand. I froze, wondering if she was going to cup my cheek, but instead she flicked my nose. I started in surprise and outrage, wrinkling it.

"Don't be so arrogant," Vivienne Dartwick chided me. "Do you think the banner's yours just because you raised it, Catherine?"

My mouth closed. I was taken aback enough to be speechless, for once.

"We've all stayed with you for our own reasons," she said. "For oaths or causes, because we believe in the woman or the dream, because we have our own pride. You don't get to take that from us, Cat. It never belonged to you."

"It'll get you killed," I hoarsely replied.

"There are things worth dying for," she calmly said. "It's not all on your shoulders, Cat."

She looked at the light of the campfire in the distance, the drifting sounds of what seemed to be Indrani loudly singing. I followed her gaze.

"Sometimes other people can light the fire," Vivienne gently told me. "You're not the only one it keeps warm."

She offered up her hand, slowly, and like a lost child I took it. She tugged me along, and as the veil of Night fell I let her take me home.

—

“- you take that back,” Robber said, tone deadly serious. “Sallastus? Really, *Sallastus*?”

Akua Sahelian, somehow making a fallen log look like a sofa to lounge on, cocked an imperious eyebrow.

“His comedies were among the finest Miezian works that remain to us,” she replied.

“Oh Gods,” Indrani said, grinning like a loon, “you actually sound defensive.”

I pulled at my bottle – like most evenings whose bounty was arranged by Archer, it was heavy on bottles but low on cups – and shared a look with Pickler, who was rolling her eyes. It was always unsettling on a goblin face, especially at night when their eyes got somewhat luminous.

“I hate it when they talk theatre,” I told my Sapper-General. “I don’t know half the names.”

“My mother made me read some plays so I wouldn’t look like a fool if I participated in a *takha*,” Pickler admitted, “but I always despised the stuff. I might as well have spent the time clipping my nails, at least it’d have improved my life somewhat.”

She was drinking from a tankard of dark beer that was about as large as human head, and so a significant chunk of her chest, which someone had painted the side of with a very nice, if threadbare, rendition of a human being set on fire. There were also notches around the rim, which I decided not to think too much about. There were a *lot* more than I’d anticipated.

“Neither of you have a speck of culture in you,” Hakram mourned, seated to my side. “It’s sad what this army has come to.”

“You read Proceran bodice rippers,” I sneered. “I take no commentary on taste from you at all, buddy.”

“Gobbler, Hakram, *why*?” Pickler asked him, sounding genuinely puzzled. “It’d be like reading about mountain goats mating, only with pretensions of sentiment.”

“Hey,” I objected.

“No, she has a point,” Masego noted.

"- *Augustina*?" Akua hissed, sounding outraged. "Perhaps if you want to hear Aulus Blandus' verses as butchered by a second rate-

A heartbeat passed, eyes moving towards the irritated-looking orc.

"Hierophant's a member of an Ashuran love cult," Hakram revealed, shamelessly betraying a comrade.

"I am?" Masego asked, sounding surprised.

Vivienne coughed, sounding a little embarrassed.

"It is possible as fee was paid in your name so you might be added to the rolls of the Covenant of Gasping Ecstasy," she admitted.

Indrani, leaning her head backwards over Vivienne's shoulder, wiggled her eyebrows.

"All right, you now have my undivided attention," Archer announced. "Continue."

"Tell me you didn't use treasury funds for that," I begged.

There was a beat of silence.

"It was from Indrani's pay, she's still stealing it," Hakram said.

"Hakram, you treacherous whore," Vivienne cursed, as I began laughing convulsively. "I knew it was a mistake to bring you into this."

Indrani, not unexpectedly, was more amused than offended by the fact that Vivienne had continued robbing her for years. It wasn't like she usually touched the coin I had kept in her name, anyways. Masego cleared his throat, cutting through my snickers and Vivienne's continued tongue lashing. Indrani flopped gracelessly over Vivienne, landing on the dark-haired lady's lap and then extending an empty hand – only for Masego to fill it with her bottle without even turning to look.

"Are there obligations attached?" he seriously asked. "I do not want to be a feckless associate."

"He's right," Archer approved. "What did I even pay for? There better be naked parts."

"I don't believe participation in the yearly pleasure festival is mandatory," Vivienne said.

"Are you quite sure?" Indrani hopefully asked.

"The priests have their sermons compiled every few years," Adjutant told Zeze. "I'll try to get you one of the scrolls."

"That is very kind of you," Masego beamed, but then his expression turned shifty. "Though am I to understand that as a trick this is an acceptable specimen?"

"For a human, maybe," Robber said. "Not enough blood."

"I *am* human," Zeze helpfully reminded him. "Good, then. How might I go about making Adanna of Smyrna a member?"

Indrani, useless as always, began belly laughing and even Vivienne couldn't hide a smirk. Neither of the goblins were inclined to intervene and I'd recently been informed that Hakram was a treacherous whore, so that left either me or Akua. I glanced at her, finding her looking mightily amused and very much disinclined to help.

"Zeze," I said. "That, er, might be misinterpreted."

He looked at me in surprise.

"How?"

"You'd be trying to make her part of a love cult of which you are also part," I slowly said.

Indrani contributed a gestured that, while accurately representing what I was getting at, was very much less than helpful.

"This is why I call you a wench," I told her.

"Ugh," Masego said, wrinkling his nose. "How could anyone make that mistake? She is terrible. And she must know she is, as I frequently tell her so."

Yeah, I had no trouble believing that. The frequent screaming matches were something of a hint.

"I do believe it is possible for Ashuran citizens to become parts of a prestigious ship's crew in an honorary manner," Akua idly said. "On occasion even ships that have sunk. Perhaps *that* might make a more fitting present, Hierophant."

"Oh," Masego muttered, "it would be as if I were telling her to go to the bottom of the sea. That *is* clever."

He actually seemed pretty enthusiastic at the prospect of trying to get one over the Blessed Artificer, which was kind of heartwarming in a very Praesi way. The conversation drifted towards some of the more elaborate slights we'd seen dealt out over the years, something Robber was quite interested in arguing

with the rest of us, and Vivienne eventually got tired of Archer being sprawled over her so she pushed her to the ground. Pickler had moved to sit on the other side of Hakram to discuss something about a fellow War College student I'd never known who'd recently gotten promoted back in Praes, so Vivienne slid into the spot by my side with a bottle of her own in hand. I offered up mine and we toasted, drinking down.

"I'm surprised we're all here," I said afterwards, eyes flicking on the other side of the fire.

Akua was telling a story about some ancestor of hers who'd drowned a Stygian slaver in melted slave chains, to the vocal approval of some around our circle.

"It's out of my hands," Vivienne murmured. "And I have made my peace with it."

I hid my surprise. Forgiveness was not something either of us would ever offer over the Doom of Liesse, so I was not sure of her meaning. She must have sensed my uncertainty.

"I don't deal in absolution," she said. "Not for me, not for you, and certainly not for her. The Folly must and will have an answer. But it's not for me to decide what it will be."

She half-smiled at me.

"You've trusted me with a lot, Catherine," Vivienne said. "And it's not a tie that goes only one way. I trust you with this – I believe you'll see justice done, in the end, or something like it."

"I have you an oath, once," I quietly said.

"I relieve you of it," she said, without a speck of hesitation.

I went still with surprise, which had her smiling.

"What good would it to, for me to demand her suffering?" Vivienne murmured. "Would it unmake the tears of a single orphan, mend a single inch of blighted land? Liesse was lost, and all who dwelled within it, but I'll not chase vengeance of healing."

"I have not forgotten the Doom," I said.

"I don't expect you will," she said. "It lingers in your dreams more than mine. Worry not of me, Catherine, when you see to this. I would be quite the fool, to need twice to learn the lesson that no amount of taking can ever set things right."

I wasn't quite sure what to answer to that. It felt like getting her blessing, somehow, but also like she was... washing her hands of it. As if it no longer concerned her. Troubled and yet dimly

relieved, I sunk back into the warmth of the conversation instead. It was not long before my bottle was empty and the smile back on my face, the ebb and flow of conversation with old friends filling me whole. The hours passed, long into the night, and most of us stayed around the fire instead of returning to the guildhall. Indrani had brought blankets, and though Robber disappeared into the dark it was only after tucking in a very drunk Pickler affectionately. I drifted into sleep easily, but woke while it was still dark. There were still hours left until dawn, Sve Noc's first gift told me.

I tried to stay under the blankets, by the dying embers of the fire, but I got restless. Taking care not to wake anyone I snuck away, finding my staff propped up against a tree not far. I couldn't remember if I'd actually asked Hakram to see to that, but I suspected that even if I had not the dead yew would have turned up on its own. It was not an artefact, not exactly, but it was not a simple staff either. With the moon hung in the sky above us and a cool wind beginning to blow, I found my steps leading me to the guildhall. Not to find a bed, no, but to seek another old friend: the roof. It was flat atop, easy to tread, and easier still to limp to the edge.

I could not see the great valley that'd be spread out below around the plateau, but I could fix it in my mind's eye. I breathed out and leaned forward, as if tempting the fall. The streak of ice, that fear I would never entirely master, came as bidden. Like an old friend. Not the only one, though friend was not the right word for her.

"Do you still have the dream?" Akua softly asked.

I'd not heard her come, but I had known it. We were bound, she and I, had been since I ripped her heart out of her chest and stole her soul. Though she was next to me, I did not turn.

"Yes," I murmured. "Though I came here, I think, because I am curious."

"Of what?"

"If you stand at the edge of the cliff a hundred times, or a hundred times that," I said. "Does the fear ever go away?"

I felt her gaze on me.

"Does it?" Akua asked.

I half-smiled.

"I don't know yet," I said. "Maybe it's something that can be taught, with time and will. Maybe it's just nature, Akua, and the

best we can ever do is put a bridle on it and hope it doesn't pull too hard."

"Then why do you keep coming here, dearest?"

"Because I don't know the answer," I said, and turned to meet her eyes.

Lovely in the gloom, as she was lovely everywhere. And I felt it my clenching stomach, the fear of the drop, but it did not rule me. Not tonight. So I reached out, slowly, and as her gaze widened in surprise as I cupped her cheek. It was not a loud thing, or one requiring much power. Just will and knowledge. My fingers withdrew, having barely grazed her skin, and she went still.

"What have you done?" Akua Sahelian asked.

"I no longer have power over you," I said. "You are bound to neither my mantle or my power, and Sve Noc has no purchase over your soul save what you give them."

"You are mad," she faintly said. "I could leave, right now. Even without Night, I know such tricks that..."

"I know," I agreed.

"Then *why*?" she hissed.

"Because I don't know the answer," I said and turned away, closing my eyes.

For a long time I stayed there, the wind in my hair, and let silence keep the night. When I opened them, Akua was still at my side. I almost smiled. Wasn't that something?

In the valley below, far from my sight, the dead began to gather.

Chapter 75: Desolation

"My dear Chancellor, I am most disappointed in you. If she escapes the crocodiles before the rope snaps, then of course she will go free. What does it matter, that she will oppose us again? Only the fearful insist on winning every game of shatranj they play."

– Dread Emperor Malevolent I, the Unhallowed

I didn't know which part should rightfully be considered the miracle: that we'd managed to cram this many Named into one hall, or that a brawl had yet to ensue.

"Some among us call them the Scourges," the White Knight said.

The tone had been calm, unhurried, but the words alone were enough to kill every whisper in the ruined basilica where we'd gathered. There were nearly thirty Named were here – twenty-seven, if you counted my own coalescing claim – but Hanno had the undivided attention of every last one. Revenants were never pleasant surprises on the battlefield, but most people here had run into one of the Scourges at some point. Some had walked away with scars or dead friends, and even those who'd gotten lucky to be spared either now knew better than to believe the Dead King was without champions of his own.

"That is not without meaning," Hanno of Arwad said. "You all understand, as few ever do, that names have power. That they bind us to Creation and bind it in return."

The dead had not been kind to the Basilica of Perceval Martyred. Neshamah had made sure that no holy grounds remained in the capital after taking it, and it would take long before the priests were able to consecrate this place again. The defilement had been... thorough. Dust, soot and ash now painted once-pale walls, and there was hardly a single pane of tainted glass that'd not been shattered. An entire hunk of wall had been ripped out to the side, reduced to rubble, and the front gates were unusable from the bell tower that'd been smashed down against them. Even the ceiling had not been spared, some kind of great horn piercing at it, and so sunlight came down in dusty rays on the tall terrace where the White Knight stood.

Below the rest of our Named were gathered in small gaggles in gangs, keeping to circles of their owns even within the greater allegiance to Above or Below – however loose it might be – and seated on the same ornate stone benches where the mighty and wealthy of the city of Hainaut had once sat to be lectured by priests now long dead. I stood above on the terrace as well, leaning against a sloping arch with my staff of dead yew resting against my shoulder, but I liked the coolness of the shade better. I'd looked like a right idiot if I had to pull down my hood because the sun was getting in my eyes, and I could only be amazed by the way that the White Knight could stand in a sunbeam and apparently not mind in the slightest.

Truly, his powers were beyond the reckoning of mere mortal such as myself. Hanno glanced at me, either smelling out the sarcasm or to indicate I should pick up where he'd left off. We'd not planned this out in great detail, but it was true in a way I had more experience with this part than he did. I pushed off from the arch, limping to the edge of the terrace.

"Naming them gave them weight," I said. "Part of that was in your minds, holding up as something to be dreaded or fought, but what truly matters is the weight it gave them on Creation. A Revenant

belonging to their number is no longer simply one of the Dead King's stolen corpses, it is now a *Scourge*."

I let the word ripple out, enjoying the way it reverberated in the hall even now that there was a gaping hole in the wall. Say what you would about Alamans, they knew how to build temples.

"That story will be as wind in their sail," I said. "They'll be harder to destroy because of it, a little luckier and a little sharper. More than that, they'll find it easier to kill *you*."

No one argued with what I'd said but I found some faces growing blank or, for the less practiced, outright skeptical. Mostly on the heroic side, as my lot rarely needed much convincing that the world was out to get them, but the Berserker and the Headhunter stood out in their almost-derision. Irritated, I struck at the stone with my staff once and let the clap jolt half of them.

"Don't be fools," I said, tone grown sharp. "You think you survive falling off cliffs and make it through blood-curling curses because you're just *that good*? As Named we are not only subject to the common rules of Creation, but those of our kind as well. Sometimes that is a shield, but if you act like a strutting boy it will bury you."

I swept the crowd with a look and this time found a more receptive audience. Good. I wasn't going to tolerate our losing Named just because the world had not yet gotten around to beating some measure of humility into their bones.

"If we raise the Scourges above our other foes, as we have, then Creation will follow," I said. "And the least of the ways they'll be raised is in the way that all those little fortunate turns, all those coincidences in your favours? They're gone. 'The Scourges can kill Named'. That is the very bedrock of the story we made about them."

I flicked a glance at Hanno, who took back the torch, and retreated back to my more comfortable nook as he stepped into the light again.

"Yet we can kill them as well," the White Knight calmly said. "Names, Bestowals, Choosings – however you would call what we are, it is a nature that thrives when overcoming adversity. All that the Scourges represent is an adversity to overcome."

I almost cursed, since that kind of 'life is a trial we are destined to win' attitude being reinforced by the fucking Sword of Judgement was the last thing we needed before this scrap, but I was pleasantly surprised after a moment.

"Make no mistake," Hanno continued, "the Black Queen did not misspeak. Fail to heed her warnings not only at your own peril

but at that of everyone here, and millions more across Calernia. Yet in raising our opposition higher, we have also given ourselves deeds to strive for."

He smiled, face serene.

"Great foes are overcome," the White Knight told them. "That is the shape of such stories."

Well, that or you died. I could see how that wouldn't be the greatest speech to give on the eve of battle, though, so I'd let it slide. I stayed back and let him keep at it a while longer. We'd already tended to the few complaints under the Terms there'd been, which for once hadn't mostly been backbiting between his folk and mine. My armies hadn't been the only one to enjoy a night of drinking and festivities, after the Fourth arrived, and in the drunken celebration that'd ensued a great deal of... indecorous behaviour had ensued. It was worth hearing them out just for the petty pleasure I'd felt at Hanno making the Page admit that the 'desecration of his affairs' he was talking about was some drunk Volignac trooper taking a piss on his saddlebags. The mood had been pretty lighthearted, even through the inevitable amount of sniping that ensued when Named were forced to sit in the same hall, but moving on to the meat of the reason we were here had doused that. Revenants were rarely a laughing matter, and the Scourges never.

"- by joining the combat and eyesight reports, we have determined which of them are likely to be participate in the coming battle for Hainaut," Hanno said, then paused. "Our thanks to the Adjutant for this work, as it was him who saw to the work and found signs of the Tumult having operated on the outskirts of Prince Klaus' column."

There were some murmurs of appreciation, several grudging, and stone silence from others. I drummed my fingers against the side of my staff, committing those faces to memory. One of them had me sneering: like I'd needed *more* of a reason to dislike the Valiant Champion.

"So how many are we in for?" Roland asked.

"Eight," the White Knight calmly said.

Yeah, that did little to raise spirits. Each of those Revenants were dangerous on their own, but several became significantly worse when they were paired with proper allies – the Hawk and the Mantle in particular. The Berserker let out a low whistle and grinned.

"Eight out of ten," she said. "Keter *really* wants us dead, looks like."

"Eight out of nine," I corrected, pushing off the arch. "The Firstborn got the Stitcher up north."

That was well received. The Tumult was more of a danger, practically speaking, but the Stitcher's tendency to turn up in a dragon's worth of animated dead bodies was more of a horror to behold than the Tumult's own preference for tossing storms at soldiers.

"The Seelie is missing," the White Knight said, "but we believe her to out east, leading the assault against Princess Rozala Malanza. Every other known Scourge has been encountered by one of our columns as they advanced, and they should all be within marching of when we believe the battle in Hainaut will happen."

I smiled, beginning to methodically stuff my dragonbone pipe with a packet of wakeleaf.

"So now we talk about the pleasant end of the business," I idly said. "Namely, how we're going to destroy them all."

Even coming from the – former, thank you Cordelia – Arch-heretic of the East, that won some cheers both sides of the gallery. Hanno picked up the thread as I passed my palm over the bowl, lighting the leaf with a small flicker of flame, and I breathed in the smoke with a small pleased sigh.

"We have some knowledge of the abilities of all eight, and will speak of them in order," the White Knight said. "Beginning with the Wolfhound."

There was a beat of silence, then I cleared my throat.

"Hierophant," I prompted.

Masego started, as if surprised. My eyes narrowed and I threaded small tendrils of shadows along the arches going up the ceiling. He'd not had an open book in hand, no, but looking at it from above... that sneaky little shit. Three rows back there was an open book in Mthethwa, which I was pretty sure he'd been turning the pages of discreetly with wrested magic. He'd been using the clairvoyance of the glass eyes to look through the back his own head and the rest of the things in the way, reading without even giving a visible hint. I gave him a look making it clear we'd be having words about this later even as Indrani, seated at his side, snickered in amusement at his expense. She did deign to tell him whose likeness had been asked for, at least, and Zeze had an illusion of the Wolfhound up in the blink of an eye.

It was pretty obvious why the Revenant had earned that sobriquet: a sculpted helmet of iron in the shape of that animals head had been its signature since its first appearance, though he also seemed to prefer using a sword a board when it had the choice.

Armoured from head to toe, the Wolfhound's face had never been seen, though he'd spoken with Named on occasion.

"Most of you will have encountered the Wolfhound at some point," Hanno said. "He is, by our reckoning, the Scourge with the fewest deaths – Named or not – to his name. That is because he is rarely out alone."

"He's a bodyguard," I bluntly said. "And one of the better Revenants when it comes at taking a blow. He seems able to see through illusions and able to partly shrug off aspects. As I understand it, the Mirror Knight experience this firsthand."

Christophe the Pavanie, seated near the back of the heroic side and with only Tariq sharing his bench, looked surprised to have been called on.

"I did," he replied. "We've clashed... six times, now? One of my aspects allows me to reflect the blows of my enemies, to turn them back, but it did not affect him the way it should have. The strength was weakened before it touched him."

"It has been the same with magic," the White Knight added. "He is not immune to spells, but they do seem to weaken when turned on him."

"Weaknesses?" Roland called out.

"We haven't found any," I admitted. "He doesn't seem to have any great offensive talents, but when it comes to the defensive he doesn't seem to have any great flaw. It's why we usually see him partnered with another Scourge, they're expected to be handling that aspect."

"The Twilight Ways would destroy him," the Grey Pilgrim said.

I nodded.

"They would," Hanno agreed. "For those of you who are able to open gates, it is a valid tactic. Still, as with all Revenants I would warn you of mobility – even the slow are quicker than they seem, and they appear to be able to feel the forming of a gate into Twilight."

Which did make an unfortunate amount of sense. Creation liked balance: the Ways were deadly to Revenants, so the Revenants could smell them out. I would have appreciated the Gods suspending that rule until the lives of everyone on Calernia were no longer on the line, but deities did tend to be inconsiderate shits. Except for my own splendid and flawless patronesses, of course. I felt Andronike's unamused touch brush against my mind, the divine equivalent of a half-hearted glare.

"We do have some other talents we believe would go through his defences," I said. "Among them, the Rapacious Bard is capable of affecting souls. That should ignore the protection."

"Overwhelming physical strength works as well," Hanno said, a tad drily.

Between the Berserker, the Champion and the Mirror Knight we had that covered.

"The partner is usually the trouble," the Barrow Sword pointed out. "Whoever runs into him needs to expect a hard knifing."

"Colourfully put," Hanno said, "but essentially true. So far we have seen him paired with the Hawk-"

I saw the Mirror Knight winced, as if still hurting, and Archer smile unpleasantly. She'd not liked that the Hawk had gotten to escape from their duel in the slightest.

"- the Mantle and the Varlet," Hanno finished. "We should not dismiss other possibilities, but Keter does tend to favour certain sets of tactics."

I pulled at my pipe, blowing smoke upwards. The White Knight was right. It was, I suspected, because Neshamah was undead. He couldn't really *learn* anymore, even when infusing himself with the knowledge of his latest acquisitions. So instead he let his Revenants find approaches that work and then used his wits to make openings for that knife instead – a skill he'd mastered while still alive.

"We burned two aspects of the Varlet's at Maillac's Boot," I announced. "So I won't count them out, but they're got a lot less of a bite now."

"It's the sneaking aspect that's left," Indrani said. "So watch for daggers in the back, it's what it has left."

It was a spirited decision that ensued, moving through one Scourge after another. The Hawk, deadly at range and harbouring an aspect we believed have her the simple ability to 'kill'. It was why her arrows, even though often made up of mundane material, could wound even someone like the Mirror Knight: there was nothing that she could not, in principle, kill. She was weak up close, though, and tended to leg it when Named closed range. The Drake, though very difficult to kill by most villainous means, fared poorly against Light and Tariq had teased out of him at Maillac's Boot what we believed to be his last survival trick. The Mantle shared the weakness against Light, at least great quantities of it, but was capable of hamstringing practitioners the same way she did me.

The Tumult – or Archmage, as heroes insisted – was a spellcaster on par with both Masego and the Witch of the Woods, meaning if we didn't want casualties to start shooting up the moment it showed up we needed to field either against it immediately. Its fondness for using storms and weather meant most of our fighters struggled to close range. Indrani couldn't do shit to him even using **See** to aim. The Axeman, as they called the Pale Knight, hadn't been encountered frequently save by those who'd served in the Cleves front. While he was just as frustratingly hard to scratch for everyone as I'd found him, the Headhunter pointed out that the way he'd always avoided the Myrmidon and the Red Knight in fights meant he must have some weakness to his armour. The Mirror Knight noted he seemed to often serve as leader among not only Revenants but the lesser dead, a tactician as much as champion. There was little to say on the Varlet, save that not even our finest wards seemed entirely capable of stopping its sneaking about, which left us with only one left.

The Prince of Bones.

"Light can make a dent," Hanno said. "Though only so much."

His stance had loosened over the length of the conversation, first going from calm to easy and then all the way to him sitting at the edge of the terrasse. I was, myself, leaning against a half-broken stone pulpit and pulling at my second packet of wakeleaf.

"He can close Twilight Gate, if they are still forming," the Witch of the Woods flatly said.

I cocked a brow. She'd not taken off her painted clay mask, but I gathered that under it she was frowning.

"Mine as well," the Pilgrim agreed. "Though not quickly, and it can be fought."

"Sorcery doesn't work either," the Harrowed Witch volunteered. "Mine, anyways. I can dent if I put my full strength into the spell, but think we'd have to strip him layer by layer to get anywhere."

I didn't see an obvious solution to the Prince of Bones either, to be honest. The illusion of him Masego was providing made it clear why: we were dealing with, essentially a corpse encased in what had to be a few hundred pounds of steel. It looked like armour, but it wasn't. Just layers upon layers of metal, moved by the necromancy buried safely deep within. Worse, that steel was layered with enchantments and whatever devilries the Dead King could muster. Running away wasn't usually an issue, the Prince was slow on the move, but when you *couldn't* run? Even the Pilgrim hadn't been able to put him down, and the man had a Choir whispering tricks in his ear.

"The Firstborn tell me it's essentially the same with Night," I offered up, having never fought him myself. "And he usually sticks with the Grey Legion, so he won't be easy to pick off."

"We just need to crush him head on," the Berserker insisted.

"Crush what, solid steel?" the Barrow Sword mocked. "No, what we need is the right blade."

A few looks were flicked the Mirror Knight's way. The Severance hadn't been a secret since the incident at the Arsenal.

"We mean to use it for the Dead King alone," the White Knight said, "lest he find a way to overcome its edge."

"If it comes to that, we've been able to bury him before," I said. "The Witch of the Woods has done it. It's not a killing stroke, but we can keep him out of our hair long enough for enough Named to gather *something* will stick."

It wasn't the most confidence-instilling of suggestions, but at the moment it might genuinely be the best we got. And, to be honest, if we could deal with the Grey Legion for good the Prince would be much less of a threat. I pointed out as much, which Tariq backed to the hilt.

"Alone he is a slow, lumbering monster," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Much of his power comes from his legion – the Hashmallim believe some of his Bestowal is invested in his soldiers, and that they in turn empower him."

"If it comes to that," I finally said, "I'll authorize the last of our goblinfire to be used."

That cheered some but other less. Not only because the green flames were notoriously prone to spreading out of control but also, I realized in a startling moment, because some of the people here believed the Prince would actually survive the fires. Most of them had never encountered the substance, I reminded myself, but I still found myself shaken by the skepticism. The conversation stretched out for another hour, mostly when Named were willing to share particular talents that made them well-fitted to fighting one of the Scourges, but eventually we called the council at an end. I kept Ishaq back, as the Barrow Sword had essentially been confirmed as my lieutenant among villains when I kept bringing him to war councils, while Hanno was instead accompanied by the Pilgrim.

"Some bands seem like natural fits," the White Knight said.

"Agreed," I grunted. "Troubadour, Summoner and Guardian?"

The Silent Guardian had signed that she believed she'd be able to handle the Wolfhound, due to an aspect of hers, so the Summoner for mobility and the Troubadour for the killing stroke were the obvious additions.

"Either Huntress or Sidonia with them," Hanno replied, nodding in assent.

"Huntress," I said. "I know for a fact she's not only competent at range but trained herself in tactics against archers."

By which I really meant Archer, but it'd work against the Hawk as well and she could imbue her arrows with Light so that'd be trouble for Mantle too.

"The Young Slayer with them," Tariq suggested.

I cocked a brow, but Ishaq was stroking his beard in agreement.

"As a spotter and a skirmisher both, the boy has talent," the Barrow Sword said. "If you desire the Huntress to be one of the strikers, then you need a replacement."

I glanced at Hanno, who after a moment nodded.

"Sold," I said. "Mirror Knight for the Prince of Bones?"

"There's no one else who would be able to take a hit from him," the White Knight replied. "Who to pair him with is the issue. I would argue against a full band here."

The Barrow Sword, I saw, was watching us both like a starving hound being shown into a larder. *Why?* After a moment I realized that even as I thought the question, Ishaq had asked it out loud.

"Because Hanno doesn't think we can kill the Prince of Bones," I said, "which means investing a full band there would be a waste. A partner, though, is pretty much a precaution to keep the Mirror Knight alive."

"I do not understand what makes him different from the Wolfhound," the Barrow Sword slowly said, "save perhaps greater strength."

"The Prince of Bones is a hammer," Tariq calmly said. "We can dull the blow, but it will fall. The Wolfhound, and whoever will accompany him, are blades we can break."

"It's going to go the usual," I explained. "You know, the beats – we win, we lose, we win again. Only with Wolfhound and partner, like Tariq said we have a good change of rolling those two Scourges up outright. Kill them clean. We don't have that with the Prince. Instead we use those beats to pull out the Mirror

Knight when this goes south on him, and we just need a partner for that. Not a full band."

The Barrow Sword looked at us, smiling in glee and yet somehow almost frightened.

"Is it always like this?" Ishaq asked. "Battles between Bestowed. Like... shatranj for the mad, with half the rules unknown and the rest shifting?"

I cocked my head to the side. In my experience?

"Yeah, pretty much," I shrugged.

I turned when the heroes chuckled, met with almost fond looks.

"The Black Queen has sharpened herself against exceptional opponents," the Pilgrim said. "I have known few Bestowed, either by Above or Below, whose knack for stratagems was stronger."

The Barrow Sword had the gall to look kind of relieved, the shit.

"If this practice is to be considered an art," the White Knight said, "in all humility you might be considered to stand before some of its finest living practitioners."

Compared to the Intercessor we were all rather lacking, but then I supposed that was rather his point. I cleared my throat.

"I was thinking Stalwart Apostle," I said. "I'm told she's worked with him before, and though she's hardly a veteran-"

"I must disagree," Hanno said.

"Indeed," the Pilgrim said. "Christophe is a remarkably enduring young man, but the foe is not one to underestimate. The Forsworn Healer would be a more appropriate partner."

"That leaves *you* as our primary healer, Tariq," I said. "Which is a fucking waste, considering your striking power."

"More lives will be saved by your hand red than pale, Peregrine," the Barrow Sword said.

There was a challenge in the tone, but Tariq seemed disinclined to address it.

"We can revisit," the White Knight said, correctly ascertaining I wasn't convinced. "For the Axeman – the Pale Knight, if you insist, though we seem to have a profusion of knighthoods these days – the Headhunter and Vagrant Spear seem like our finest foot forward."

I mulled that. The Headhunter knew their way around fighting the Pale Knight, and Sidonia had a knack for killing things she shouldn't be able to. Neither were good at taking hits though.

"Needs muscle," I said. "Berserker?"

"I had thought to leave them a pair," Hanno admitted. "If we use bands to go aggressively after the weaker elements at first..."

"That's a recipe for bodies on the floor," I grunted. "Two pair against two of the Dead King's heavies? We're losing at least one of those for sure."

"The Hierophant against the Archmage seems a match all can agree on, at least," Tariq stepped in.

I inclined my head to the side.

"I was considering going after them with the full Woe, actually," I said.

"Not Lady Dartwick, surely?" the Pilgrim asked.

"No," I said, "we'd need muscle instead. I have candidates."

One was by my side, but the downside to taking Ishaq was that he was a natural captain: he'd be a lot more useful as the head of a band of five. That left two other options, each hard to swallow for different reasons. The Valiant Champion was honestly probably the finest shield left, with both the Guardian and the Mirror Knight already assigned. I just happened to despise her. And the other was, well, the Squire. Between Arthur and Indrani we'd be able to hold a line up close if we had to, while Zeze and I could slug it out with the likes of the Archmage without missing a step. The issue, though, was that Arthur Foundling himself might be a threat to our lives. His story was not one that seemed all that friendly to the continued survival of the Woe.

"I would agree in principle," Hanno slowly said. "The Archmage is the Scourge I would like dealt with soonest."

It was all haggling after that, were I began to discern different strategies. Ishaq was fresh to this sort of planning so he tended to fall back to the Levantine conception of a band of five, the same that'd founded the Dominion itself: Champion, Slayer, Binder, Brigand and Pilgrim. Which wasn't a bad instinct, in most circumstances, but he needed to wean himself off it. When facing the unknown balance was useful, but when planning the destruction of a known quantity it was better to tailor the band to the foe. Tariq, on the other hand, was coming at it from another angle entirely: he was setting things up to keep Named alive. Not because the old man was a soft touch, although when he could

afford to be he was, but because in the Pilgrim's experience if heroes fought an enemy for long enough they *won*.

I wasn't going to argue with that too much, but there were risks to that kind of thinking. Both sides of the fence were playing here, and I'd proved at the Battle of the Camps that some calibre of foe time wasn't enough to overcome. Yet theirs, were in away, the old conventions of Named warfare. Hanno and I had been raised by our teachers to approach those fights differently. The difference between us, I began to notice, was that he seemed much more inclined to take risks. I chalked it up to the habit of having providence on his side, at first, but eventually I was forced to concede otherwise. I was just used to planning from the starting position that I was going to lose *something* before it was all over, while the White Knight *had* known the kind of full-throated victories that'd been so rare in my career. He'd known them pretty regularly, too, with the defeats at Black's hands being pretty severe departures from the norm. We settled what we could for today, agreed to speak again tomorrow and broke off.

Except he didn't leave and neither did I, because I'd noticed something and he'd not tried very hard to hide it.

"Witch of the Woods," I said. "Valiant Champion. Stalwart Apostle, and last of all the Merry Balladeer."

Names he'd been careful never to let drawn into an assignment, along with his own. A pretty neat band of five, though the Apostle was young and Hells if I knew what he wanted out of the Balladeer. No Named was every truly without strength, but as far as I knew she was a bardic Named without any standout talents.

"I did not mean to hide it," Hanno said. "It was simply not a discussion I wanted to have with company."

My brow raised, as did my wariness. I'd already sworn oath to Tariq that I'd not meddle with how the White Knight overcame his doubts, and that meant not letting myself be drawn into too pivotal a conversation.

"It's a band of five," I acknowledged. "I'm simply not sure what you mean to do with it."

North, to end the threat of the bridge that was still looming tall in the distance? Or to lead them here in the city, a blade against the Scourges. Hanno chuckled, though the days where the sound would have carried that undertone of serene amusement seemed pass. Whatever certainties it'd been that'd lain at the heart of the calm, they had been shaken. *Shit*, I thought, *Tariq's right*. I'd still half-believed, deep down, that the old man had been exaggerating. Not so much, looking at the unease on the White Knight's face now.

"I was not so certain myself, when I woke up this morning," Hanno said. "But it is going north, Catherine. It must be the north."

I slowly nodded. It was what I'd wanted, only now getting it was making my fingers twitchy. Unsure if a mistake had been made or not.

"The bridge at Thibault's Wager must be broken," I finally said, choosing my words.

"How carefully you speak around me, these days," the White Knight wanly smiled.

I did not answer. I knew a dead end when I saw one.

"I do not know," Hanno finally said, "how much good I can truly do here in Hainaut. You are a capable leader and tactician, seasoned in leading Named."

"Your departure would be a loss," I honestly said. "And not just because of your skills in combat. But I still believe it to be a necessary one."

"I imagine you do," the White Knight said, "though that is not what moves me to go."

He looked up at the ceiling, where the afternoon had turned the lay of the sun. Shadows gone bright, light swallowed up by the shade.

"There are goods I do not know if I should strive for," Hanno of Arwad said. "If I can achieve, even if I did."

He breathed out.

"So I will start, perhaps, with the good of which I am certain," the White Knight said, meeting my eyes. "It will be north, Catherine Foundling, and the light that still lies within my grasp."

Chapter 76: Rapt

"Princes dream of victory, farmers dream of peace."

– Proceran saying

There would be no hiding the departure of the White Knight, so there was no point in even trying. We did the opposite instead: all but threw a godsdamned parade for his band, gallantly going into the unknown as they were. We rustled up a crowd drawing from all armies, got them cheering with a few speeches about heroism and how of course we were going to win, just look at how Evil that fucker the Dead King was. Paraphrasing as I might be, I

liked to believe I'd seized upon the essence of the oration. If you filled the belly of soldiers and opened up casks of booze they'd cheer at pretty much anything, in my experience, so I had it arranged. Because the cheering was what mattered, you see. It was what would stick in their heads when they thought back about this.

The White Knight and four other heroes were leaving in broad daylight and the streets were half a festival, so of *course* it was a good thing. Not something to get angry about, or afraid. Hanno and the Witch of the Woods were both major losses from the perspective of defending this city, and soldiers would know it deep down, but so long as we set the tone on how they should think of their departure it shouldn't result in a morale loss. I supposed it would be in poor taste of me to hope that the Valiant Champion got herself killed during the adventure, you know in a magnificent sacrifice for the sake of the world and all that good stuff.

Thankfully I'd never been above bad taste, so I hoped my petty little heart out.

We had fresher cats to skin, though, so I did not spare much thought for the matter as I had no doubt that Hanno would smash that bridge to pieces. Besides, perhaps removing himself from the turbulence of politics for a while would help the White Knight settle his doubts. There was nothing like a straightforward, hard-earned win to help the world make sense again. The defence of the capital would not be as straightforward an effort, and there was no doubt that a defence would soon be needed: the dead were gathering in the plains below. Like rivers coming down the hills circling the great valley at the heart of Hainaut, undead came flowing at our feet.

We conducted sorties, at first. Every day or so we sent a few thousand horse through the Twilight Ways and attacked some of the smaller packs of undead, striking quick and hard before withdrawing into the Ways before the enemy could gather in sufficient numbers to force a melee. Even a run-in with the Archmage wasn't enough to get us to stop: the Blessed Artificer and myself took to accompanying the sorties, and we were usually enough to stalemate him. But after a week, we were forced to admit that sorties were no longer really feasible. Adanna took an arrow from the Hawk about half an inch to the left of her heart, which was an unpleasant wakeup call, but beyond that the tactic itself was no longer viable.

There were just too many of the dead.

I'd never really seen it put to us so starkly, how much more of the enemy there were. Yet the city of Hainaut stood atop a tall plateau, and it made the truth impossible to deny: the capital was like a rock surrounded by the tides, a sea of death gathering

below us. We couldn't pick at the enemy because there wasn't anything like enemy formations to pick at. Just a mass of walking corpses that covered the land like a carpet of iron and bone, standing terrifyingly still. The sight of it was... not good for morale. It was one thing to know that we would have to defend the city against at least fourfold our number, it was another to see that fourfold standing silent on the field. Waiting, watching, dreaming of that final stillness. As was so typical of the Dead King, he'd drawn first blood before the battle even started and no cost to himself.

Shaping our mundane defences was not difficult, or at least not complicated. There were four stretches of wall to defend, the four cardinal directions, and a fifth force would have to be kept back as a reserve. The Alamans, now consolidated behind Princess Beatrice Volignac – who was the least powerful of them in truth, but remained the ruler of these lands in principle – tried to push for the 'honour' of defending the northern stretch, the great gate, but were refused. That task would go to the Fourth Army, as the Army of Callow's siegecraft was superior to that of any other force here. We gave them the west, instead, since the dead were certain to try to use the butte known as the *Veilleuse* to take a proper crack at overwhelming that rampart. The Levantines got the east and the south, as the latter was little more than a sheer drop and so would be easier to defend.

The Lycaonese and the Second Army were kept back as the reserve, in deference the casualties they'd already taken in the campaign. As for the Firstborn, though on parchment they belonged to the reserve as well we had particular duties for them. We were not blind to the Enemy's favourite ploys, or above turning them to our own advantage.

It had been in the air for days now, but it was the Crows coming that told me we had reached the knife's edge. The Sisters had first come to me in my dreams, always perched on my shoulders as I stood on the edge of a hundred different drops and flying away as I fell. Then one fateful dusk it was all with eyes who were able to see them circling the skies above the capital. Sve Noc had come to Hainaut in the... flesh, for lack of better term. Though I was First Under the Night, it was the Firstborn they'd come here to tend to – as was only natural, considering near every drow south of Serolen was currently quartered within the walls of the capital. The Firstborn were largely holed up along the eastern shore of the Bassin Gris, the broadly oval pool of water at the heart of the city and feeding the waterfall at its southern tip.

Rumena had pushed for it, mentioning that most drow had once lived in cities or towns that'd been near underground lakes or rivers in the Everdark. It'd been a risk putting them near the Levantines, considering the Dominion folk were just as touchy and

prone to duelling, but putting them with the Alamans near the western shore would have been even worse. Alamans reputation among the Firstborn had taken a sharp dive downwards after it became broadly known that the Langevins of Cleves had planned to backstab them over territorial gains even while they were fighting to defend the lands of that family. Not that the Firstborn were usually above a spot of backstabbing, famously, but even by their standards that'd been a tad egregious.

The cohabitation with the Levantines had actually gone rather smoothly so far. It probably helped that they mostly came out at night, taking up the majority of the watches during the dark, and so the hours spent out and about only partially overlapped. The relative peace there was a relief, as there always seemed to be a hundred things in dire need of getting done and I was ever moving from one to the next. Hakram and Vivienne did what they could to lighten the burdens, but I still felt like I was being pulled a dozen ways at any moment. Still, I could justify setting aside time for a meal with the Woe at least once a day on the basis of needing to prepare stratagems against the Archmage and I embraced the justification wholeheartedly. How much planning was actually done varied between some and none, but it was still a balm on my day to spend at least an hour talking with people I actually liked. But there had also been... changes recently, and though Akua had not acted on them immediately – or even shown much of a change at all – eventually it came to a head.

"Your patronesses have offered me power for fealty, did you know?" Akua asked me one evening.

We'd already polished off dessert and both Indrani and Masego had wandered off – they had shared quarters, but neither of them actually slept there regularly – after Hakram went to solve a jurisdiction dispute between Princess Mathilda Greensteel and the Fourth Army over a Lycaonese soldier in her service who'd palmed some of our supplies. Vivienne had excused herself after I opened a second bottle of wine, noting she still had correspondence to see to, and that'd left me alone with Akua Sahelian.

"I figured they might," I noted. "They tried the same with Masego."

And I expected Akua to decline for much the same reasons he had. Praesi had no issue with gaining power through contracts and sacrifices, but submission was another thing entirely.

"Alas, I am not so eager to surrender my soul anew," Akua said. "Though given my current straits the offer was more tempting than it would have been once upon a time."

I half-smiled, sipping at my wine. Some pale Proceran thing, from somewhere in their south.

"Is it really that hard?" I asked. "Power always comes with strings. I always thought it'd be restful, to be without them for a while."

She dressed, I had noticed, somewhat more modestly now. Still with an eye to grandeur, she'd always had that much, but the red and white gown she wore tonight was high-necked even if it was closely cut. I'd been somewhat surprised she could still change her shape even without Night, but Masego had been all too willing to tell me that was actually a consequence of her nature as 'shade' rather than anything born of Winter or Night. In most circumstances a soul split from a body, which was what Akua was, would either pass into the world beyond or be remain as either some sort of diminished apparition. Those rules, though, applied largely to people who *hadn't* cut out their own soul the way Akua had when she'd been a teenager.

She was stable, and even somewhat in control of her own nature – her appearance and movement at least – because the split had not been accident. She had taken a knife to her soul long before I put a bloody hand through her chest.

"Hypocrite," Akua chided, though with more amusement than anger. "You have clawed desperately for power ever since your first taste of it, Catherine. Your only doubts were I finding a form of it that was not personally distasteful to you. You rhapsodize on powerlessness like a queen lauds the virtues of the common farmer – but without, I notice, ever retiring to live on a farm."

I flipped her off, earning a smug smile, but did not outright deny her words. While I might be intending to abdicate queenship over Callow, I didn't exactly intend to make my sword into a ploughshare afterwards. I still had a few decades in me handling the rise of Cardinal and the steadying of the Accords. I drank of my wine, leaning back into the seat I'd years ago stolen from Arcadia, and cocked a brow at her.

"So what are you going to do?" I asked.

She went still, as if surprised. In that moment, it struck me that I'd not seen Akua wear any jewels since that night on the rooftops. A riot of elegant clothes yes, and the occasional veil, but never once adornments of silver and gold. Golden eyes watched me, hooded, and I stopped to wonder at the fact that even dressed in a simple gown she still looked as much royalty as any woman bearing a crown I had known.

"You do not offer words of caution?" she asked. "Warnings about the price of seeking power?"

Thin veil that they would have been, covering up the fear of what she might do should she gain strength again.

"It's not another cage, Akua," I said. "Only larger and with bars harder to see. I meant it."

"And should I desire to leave, here and now?" she harshly asked.

"You are," I simply said, "not my prisoner."

Her hands clenched, those long and deft fingers you saw so often on mages.

"Would you have spoken the words," Akua bitterly said, "if you thought I might leave?"

You will, I thought. Before it's all over, you will. Because that's what fate is, Akua Sahelian: the recognition that, no matter how many doors there are, there was only ever one you were going to take.

"If it is my blessing to leave you want," I said, "then you have it."

Without another word, she rose from her seat. I met her eyes in silence, not moving a finger, and she left the room without a single look back. I poured my glass full again and waited, but she did not return. I wasn't sure how long passed as I stayed there, seated and silent. I wondered, for a moment, if she'd truly left Hainaut. No, I eventually decided. She'd not yet the crossroads in her story. I finished my glass and hoisted myself up, wandering under moonlight. I could have gone to have a look at Adjutant's arbitration, but why bother? It was Vivienne I sought instead. She wasn't far, considering she was quartered in the same guildhall as I was: easier to guard, if we were both there, and it wasn't like we were lacking room. It might have been for letters that she left, but it wasn't what I found her doing.

Magelights lit up the salon she'd claimed as her work room, but instead of being seated at a desk she was on her feet. A thick plank of wood with targets painted on it, circles and squares of various sizes, was propped up against an empty bookcase and I watched with a cocked eyebrow as the heiress-designate to Callow palmed a knife and threw it. It spun with a sharp sound, the tip tearing in the middle of a painted red circle at least half an inch deep. I clapped and she turned to roll her eyes at me.

"It's a knife trick, that's all," she said.

I shrugged. I was a decent hand with a throwing knife myself, but not as good as her – not without relying on the unnatural dexterity and senses a Name could lend you.

"I didn't know you were keeping your skills sharp," I said.

I'd known she still carried knives, obviously, but that was just plain good sense.

"Knives are easiest to practice," Vivienne admitted. "Henrietta Morley has been on me about learning to use a sword passably, but I've only kept at it long enough to avoid skewering myself."

"I still have sword spars with my guards on occasion, but I'm not as keen on it as I used to be," I admitted. "I don't fight the way I used to when I was seventeen."

"Knives always came easiest to me, back when I was the Thief," she said. "Mind you, I learned more out of a month of regular lessons on that with Robber during the Iserre campaign than out of several years of kicking around as Named."

I stared at her. She'd picked up lessons from *Robber*? Well, she wasn't going to be winning any prizes for chivalry anytime soon but I figured she'd probably be quite good as slitting throats if she were ever in a bind.

"What'd you even bribe him with?" I curiously asked.

"Two months of knowing where Hakram kept his aragh stash," she grinned.

"That would have done it," I snorted.

I limped across the panelled floor until I could run a finger against the knife stuck in the plank, easing it out and testing its weight. Well-made, and if it wasn't goblin steel I'd eat my own hand. I flicked it at her, and to my pleasure she snatched it out of the air.

"So why'd you start?" I asked.

More than once I'd tried to push her into picking up a weapon, back when she'd been the Thief, but she'd always been reluctant. Even back when she'd despised the Legions, she'd been less than sanguine about killing us. I honestly couldn't remember her ever seeing her take a life outside of a battle.

"The same reason I started learning Mthethwa," Vivienne said, sitting against the edge of her desk. "I used to be envious of how the rest of you got it spoonfed, did you know? Masego was raised by the Warlock and 'Drani by the Ranger, you got the Carrion Lord as a tutor and Hakram had an entire aspect prodding him so he'd always know what you needed him to."

She smiled mirthlessly.

"Me, all I got what the scare of my life from the Assassin and a few years of running, making sure never to stay anywhere long enough the Eyes would be able to find me easily," Vivienne said.

"Gods, Indrani was raised in the middle of the fucking woods and somehow she still knew four languages and her classics in Old Miezan. So I was a little bitter about it, but mostly I used it as an excuse for why I was dragging behind."

I hid my surprise. I'd known she'd had some issues with how she felt different from the Woe, but honestly I'd figured it came more from her late arrival and well, to be blunt, being used to siding with people that were just *better* than us. Morally speaking, at least.

"But then Masego kept devouring books," Vivienne smiled. "Indrani started spying on woodworkers in Laure, you and Hakram started studying Chantant. And what did *I* do?"

"You essentially put the Jacks together from the ground up," I pointed out.

Courtesy of Aisha and Ratface we'd long had some contacts in Callow and Praes, but we'd been hopelessly outmatched by the Eyes and the Circle until Vivienne folded the Guild of Thieves and the Guild of Assassins into her Jacks and began turning our old mess into a proper network of spies.

"And I did good work," she agreed. "But you were all improving *yourselves*, and I was spending more time on excuses about why I wasn't than figuring out how I could do the same."

I wouldn't throw stones there. I might not have enjoyed learning Chantant, but part of the reason I'd been able to force myself to was that the other most arguably useful thing I could teach myself was basic magical theory and I would have preferred eating a ball of goblinfire. If Akua hadn't been particularly skilled at keeping the lessons I requested of her interesting, I'd probably still have some major swaths of ignorance there.

"After Hakram got through to me, I guess it was harder to swallow the excuses," Vivienne continued. "So I started looking at doors I'd left closed. This was one, so was Mthethwa. It's also when I set to thinking about what good could be brought to Callow, instead of lingering on all the evils still needing to be cut out."

I slowly nodded, clenching my fingers and unclenching them.

"I'm sorry, Vivienne," I quietly said. "I had no idea."

"I'd hope so," she smiled, "you were the last person I wanted to know, Cat. You'd just taken me in, I didn't want to be the dead weight."

"You never have been," I frankly told her.

The smile turned fond, but it was nothing more than that. It was, I thought, a devil she'd already faced. There was no uncertainty left there.

"It was hard to be angry with you about it, when you shared secrets so readily," Vivienne said. "I'd been with a band before, and even among heroes tricks are not often simply *given* when asked. It was one of the first things I liked about you, that you didn't hoard your knowledge."

"They weren't my tricks to start with," I shrugged.

She shook her head, as if amused.

"It's one of the reasons follow you, Cat," Vivienne said. "You don't think of it as cheapening you, when you help others get stronger."

I cleared my throat, almost embarrassed.

"And to think I'm the one who's been drinking," I teased.

She chuckled.

"Get the bottle, then," Vivienne said. "I've got a letter to Duchess Kegan to finish, but when I do it occurs to me it's been ages since we've played shatranj."

Gods, I was *definitely* finishing the bottle then. I'd take away from the sting of defeat. And still, as I limped out of the room, I found I was smiling.

—

I did not see Akua the following day.

Much as the thought dug at me from the side, I let it pass. Thankfully, there was quite enough to busy myself with. We'd sent a few outrider companies far in the valley through the Ways to have a look at the situation there, and the answers were not promising: the dead were almost finished gathering. We'd be facing an assault soon. I delegated more and more to generals and commanders, instead focusing on the Woe. If we wanted to kill the Archmage without losing one of ours in the process, we needed a solid plan. Thankfully I'd had a few ideas, and there was a reason that even now he'd finished working on the new gates Masego barely bothered to sleep. I'd asked him to make anew a breed of artefacts his father had once made for the Calamities, and later on once for myself at the Camps, and he'd taken to the request with a grief-tinged fervour.

"The spellcraft behind these is fundamentally akin to scrying," Masego said. "Which means they won't work outside the walls."

Proper scrying didn't even work within the walls, even behind the cover of the city wards, but as I understood it the 'paired stones' worked just differently enough the interference would be minimal.

"The Lady mentioned the Carrion Lord liked to use these," Indrani mentioned, chin resting on her palm.

On the table were four pairs of polished, smooth stones. One was meant to be kept inside the mouth and the other in the ear, the former to speak and the latter to hear.

"Father made them at Uncle Amadeus' request," Masego agreed. "Though he found them an interesting challenge, he always said. Their limitation as an artefact was that there was a single 'master' pair, which was the sole that could both receive and send sound to every other pair."

Which Black wouldn't have minded, since his core strategy when the Calamities fought was typically to keep Warlock out of sight and call him down like some sort of magical artillery. The master set went to the Sovereign of the Red Skies, and there was really no need for anything more complicated. My father had always been wary of complexity, when Named fought. Fragility was to be avoided at all costs in his tactics.

"Yet you've improved the design," Hakram said.

Masego clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

"I have changed it, certainly," Hierophant said. "Improved is a premature assessment."

The other object on the table was, I suspected not by coincidence, something that rather looked like a legionary's backpack. The resemblance was only a surface one, however, as though there was straps to make it easier to carry the artefact itself was mostly wood and copper. A sort of large rectangular box, it was covered with neat sets of runes set around incrustated stones. By the box a flat stone with carved Miezian numerals from one to four was waiting, and what looked like the mouth-stone from a paired set. The Warlock Wekesa had preferred a simple, smooth design to his artefacts as that fit the tactics and philosophy of the Calamities. Masego, at my behest, had created something a little more sophisticated. Aware of the fragility of such designs, we'd acted accordingly and focused it all in one place: this master box, until someone found a better name for it.

"So this lets us talk to each other instead of simply to the master set," I mused, eyeing the box.

"Inaccurate," Masego sighed. "Which is why we will require Hakram to field it."

Adjutant had been studying the box all the while, eyes narrowed.

"The incrustated stones each pair with one of the ear ones for you?" the orc asked.

Zeze smiled, visibly pleased.

"Correct."

"The box is relay of sorts, then," Hakram mused. "Only there will be a complication, one that requires active administration."

"Isoka's third principle of scarcity," Indrani drawled. "Can't use two spells that use the same parts of Creation in the same place at the same time."

Masego beamed at her and she preened.

"So the spells that transmit the sounds can't be used simultaneously," Adjutant said. "You will need me to either serve as a relay for planning, or establish a connection between two sets of stones."

"That'll be one part," I said. "Our great trouble with the Archmage so far has been that it's fucking impossible to get at it. When it knows Named are close it puts up a storm around itself, and then it usually falls into a certain pattern."

"One major offensive spell at a time, keeping an eye on the opposition in case it can breach its defences," Adjutant slowly said.

"We'll be coming at it from different angles, simultaneously," I said. "That means we need someone who can actually figure out what it's preparing to hit us with, and where. That will be you."

As additional prizes, it would also significantly lower collateral damage – if we could catch large-scale spells before they wrecked the inside of the city, we could counter them – and keep him out of the direct fighting. Hakram wasn't a fool, he was aware that he was in no shape for a scrap with Named, but this approach meant that he was still fulfilling a role and an important one to boot. I'd not invented this for him, I'd just told Masego that we were in a position to have someone dedicated to handling the core artefact if it improved its uses. Adjutant looked at me for a long time, then slowly nodded.

"My Name seems to approve," he gravelled, then shook his head and changed the subject. "Have we decided on a final roster for the combat?"

"Everyone in this room," I said, "and one more."

"Akua?" Indrani asked. "Viv's not in a place to brawl with a Scourge these days."

"I was considering the Squire," I admitted.

"No," Hakram said, without missing a beat.

"Look," I said, "I know-"

"No," Indrani flatly said.

I scowled.

"No," Masego snickered.

"I didn't even say anything," I protested.

"The kid's not ready for a fight of that calibre, even if he wasn't a replacement the Heavens are trying to line up for you," Archer said. "It's not happening, Cat, let it go."

I grit my teeth, but found no takers at the table. Fine. I'd find another use for him.

"The either we bring in Ishaq or Akua," I said.

"Akua's a stronger hitter," Indrani frowned. "And muscle's useful, sure, but the Barrow Sword's not used to working with us the way she is."

"I cut Akua loose from the Night," I said. "Along every other binding I had on her."

A flicker of surprise from Archer, but that was all.

"Good," she simply said. "About time."

Tense, I studied the other two. Masego looked puzzled but largely indifferent, while Hakram... thoughtful, but not angry or disappointed. Either of those would have stung. He gave me a look that made it clear we'd be discussing this at some point, but did not otherwise pursue the matter.

"I'd still prefer Akua either way," Indrani added. "That's why she's not been around, isn't it? She went to find some fangs."

"Good odds," I agreed. "Though she didn't tell me before going. She could just have left."

Indrani rolled her eyes.

"Sure she did," Archer said. "Zeze?"

"I would prefer her to the Barrow Sword as well," Hierophant said after a moment. "Even if she regains only middling power, her

state as a shade means she can ignore a great many traditional magical defences."

My gaze moved to Hakram.

"I prefer Ishaq in the abstract," Adjutant said. "You already have spells, steel is what you lack. But in practice, he'll be more useful as the chief for a band of five."

I breathed out. Well, that was a rather strong endorsement for her.

If she returned.

—

Dusk found me on the ramparts, looking down onto the plains below with company.

"The Dead King's making a mistake," I said.

Tariq stood at my side, rheumy eyes on the sea of death below.

"Is he?" the Grey Pilgrim mused.

"It's a pivotal battle with our backs up against the wall," I said. "We're surrounded and outnumbered. I know I warned your lot about getting cocky, Pilgrim, but I expect that they'll cut through the lesser chaff of Revenants like knives through butter."

That was the way those stories went, wasn't it? The lone company of paladins on the hill, scattering the faceless evil hordes. The few stubborn souls on the wall, keeping down from failing one more time. Creation loved a last stand, loved to turn them into victories – ruinous ones, often, but victories nonetheless.

"I am not so certain, Black Queen," Tariq said. "You knocked a gate into the wall we have our backs against."

I cast a look at him, found his face solemn.

"You think the gate tips the scales the other way?" I frowned. "It shouldn't. We could flee through those, sure, but we're not getting reinforcements. What we have is what's here, and we're severely outnumbered."

"It is not as simple as that," the Peregrine murmured. "It is not about what the gate brings as much as its existence. The stands we make, Catherine, they are not... strategic. Measures. That is what brings them power, you see. It is not a scheme, a trick."

An empty prayer, I thought.

"So you're saying that the gate muddles that," I tried.

"Is the Dead King trying to take Hainaut to destroy us and blow out the last candles of hope," the Grey Pilgrim said, "or because a twilight gate is a great war prize?"

I took a moment to let that sink in, reaching for my pipe and stuffing it. I had to turn around, as the wind blew back the first mouthful of smoke into my face, and I leaned against the crenelated rampart as Tariq kept looking below.

"If it's the candles, we win it," I finally said. "But a prize? He gets to win those. He *has* won them before."

I pulled at the wakeleaf, troubled. It was not an angle I'd considered.

"Creation is a fickle mistress," the Grey Pilgrim said. "It can be hard to tell what yarn it is she will spin. We are not without a tale of our own, I reckon. One about how a defeat here is the end of the Principate, the first step to the ruin of Calernia. Such stakes bring attention, and attention here is to our advantage I would think."

He glanced at me, arching a white brow.

"It's been hinted to me that Below's less than fond of the Dead King," I acknowledged. "Mind you, he's one of their greats. If they put the finger to the scales here, which I'm not sure they will, I don't think it'll be in his favour."

He nodded, as if he'd expected every word. Considering the angels whispering in his ear, he might have.

"And so it is not a mistake, I do not think," the Grey Pilgrim said. "It is a gamble, instead. A roll of the dice. And even in defeat, he loses nothing here he cannot afford to lose."

I almost objected that if we deal him grievous losses defending the city we'd be able to roll up and expel him from the entire principality of Hainaut, hopefully as a prelude to the Gigantes warding up the shore, but I got what Tariq actually meant. There was nothing down on the plains below that wasn't ultimately expendable to Keter, because everything but the Dead King was expendable to Keter. If this war ended with every undead made ash save for Neshamah himself but all his opposition buried, that was still a victory for the King of Death. His empire of death could always be rebuilt. He had all the time in the world. Us? Not so much. Even a sufficiently costly victory for us here played to his advantage. Every veteran soldier we lost here was one more conscript in the ranks when we came for Keter, every trick and artefact used here one fewer up our sleeve.

Attrition had always been the Dead King's favourite trick, that slow and insidious poison for which there was no cure.

"It still feels like a mistake," I murmured. "I don't know why, Tariq, but it does."

Like I was standing on the edge again, cold fear in my stomach as I looked down at the drop.

"He trains it in us," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Finding the shadow of our defeat in every action we take. It must be fought, Black Queen, else the war will be lost in our heads long before he wins it on the field."

I breathed in deep of the smoke, blew out a long stream of smoke that the wind curled away into nothingness. Tariq was not wrong. I knew that, agreed with it even.

And still it felt like the damned dreams, right before I fell.

Chapter 77: Tribulation

"I agree that outliving your enemies is the greatest of revenges, my friend, but we seem to have something of a philosophical difference about how that is to be achieved."

– Dread Empress Maledicta II

There was a pond on the guildhall's grounds.

Like everything else in this cursed city, it was dead. The weeds in the drab water had withered, the grass around the rim blackened. Even the mud at the bottom looked darker than it should. But the water was warm, having soaked in the sunlight of the day, and it was a pleasant sensation when I soaked my bad leg in it. I left my boots in the dead grass and looked up at the sky through dead branches reaching out like fingerbones. Something ghosted across the tripwire of Night I'd woven around the thicket, giving me a name before I ever saw a face. It was a short list, the people who would be able to pass with so light a presence. I clutched my silence tight, staring up at the cloudless blue sky as I waited patiently.

"How very carefree," Akua said. "I am surprised you did not send for a bottle of wine as well."

I chuckled, eyes staying on the blue.

"I still have duties this evening," I said, "and drinking half a bottle would make me want to take a nap."

It was a tempting thought even knowing I did not have the time to spare. Leaning back on the soft ground, my feet in the water and with a belly warmed by wine? It'd be a pleasant way to spend a summer afternoon, even one soon to be shadowed by war. I heard Akua come closer, wondering if the way I'd heard a sound at all was a concession on her part. Back when she'd still had hooks in the Night, her steps had made no sound and left behind no trace. Now, though, who knew?

"Are you done making plans of war, then?" she idly asked.

A little too idly, I decided.

"No," I said. "We want you with us when we go for the Archmage. Masego made paired stones."

"You'd have no use of me," Akua said. "I am without power."

I blinked in surprise. I'd thought for sure that getting fangs of her own was why she'd disappeared. Peeling my eyes away from the endless blue expanse, I turned and found her leaning against a beech tree. It was a long black dress she wore, with elaborate patterns looking like sunflowers across it all the way to the straps that kept it fastened against her collarbone. Her hair was styled in a manner I'd never seen on her before, closely cut on the left and sweeping towards the right. As was often the way when she preferred her thoughts obscured, her face was unreadable. I cocked my head to the side.

"Are you?" I asked.

She smiled viciously, all the more beautiful for the anger she bared.

"Is this when you speak of the powers of love to me?" Akua asked.

"It's not a force to be underestimated," I mildly agreed.

It had kept the Dread Empire of Praes together for forty year, after all, made it the most powerful it had been in centuries. Without Black and Malicia, the genuine trust and affection between them, it would have all collapsed years before the Conquest could begin. And without the Conquest, neither of us would be here under the afternoon sun in faraway Hainaut.

"You do not love me, Catherine," she said. "In any sense of the word. I am not your friend or your companion, I am the woman who *butchered* a hundred thousand of your people. I am the doom of Liesse, the mother of the folly you have hung around my neck."

Her fingers clenched.

"Let us not pretend otherwise," Akua harshly said. "I tire of the game."

I studied her for a long moment, finding the anger boiling in her. The confusion too, or perhaps the shame? Even when sentiment peeked through clearly, she was more nuanced a woman than most.

"You know better," I simply said.

It wouldn't work if I were lying. If there was not a genuine affection, a genuine attraction. I was not skilled enough a liar to be able to fool her for long. She knew this, too, though she did not want to believe it. But this wasn't really about me, I decided. It was about her. *You are afraid*, I thought.

"You made a choice, didn't you?" I mused.

She flinched. My hands clenched, as I tasted the heady brew that was triumph and grief so deeply intertwined as to be indistinguishable. I'd done it. From here to the end, now, it was all writ.

"I sought the fae," Akua quietly said. "Through eerie paths. And I found what I wanted: one of them blinded by story, who would not see the knife until it was too late."

"Power through blood," I murmured.

Masego had firmly rejected the notion of making up for the loss of his magic by acquiring another power, be it Night or something usurped from some lesser god. *It's not power I want*, he'd told me. *It is magic, Catherine, and for that there is no replacement*. Yet it was not in Masego's nature to seek dominion, not the way it was in Akua's. For all that they were both the children of two of some of the most powerful figures in the Wasteland, they had been raised in fundamentally different ways.

"Through murder," Akua thinly smiled. "As much the transgression as what is offered up. It would have been a... beginning. Once I devoured that strength, it would have been easier to gain more."

"And yet you didn't," I said.

Her face closed.

"I still might."

I half-smiled. She was always easiest to grasp when she was similar to me, and when I had I ever been above threatening to cut my nose to spite my face?

"And what would that prove?" I asked.

"That I am not weak," Akua coldly said.

"You say that like there's only ever one way to be strong," I replied.

She hesitated. Once upon a time, she might have dismissed that. It was too late now, though. She'd strayed too far from the invisible fences of the Wasteland, seen the greater world beyond and the myriad strange and terrifying entities that strode it. She had seen powers rivalling the greatest of the Old Tyrants, not a single one having walked down their path.

"There's only one way to claim the Tower," she said.

Praes has failed, I could have said. Or, why would you want to? Or, why does your mother still rule you?

"And will that satisfy you?" I asked instead.

She did not answer, looking away. The silence stretched out until it was so taut I feared it might snap.

"Your way," Akua finally said, "it gives nothing. I came back empty-handed."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," I murmured. "You came back after having made a choice, Akua."

"Is failure a choice, then?" she scorned. "What great revelation did I drag back with me, fleeing like a fearful child?"

I thought of a few moments stolen away before dawn, in the Graveyard's wake, of the same woman now before me standing above Kairos Theodosian with burning eyes. Of the words she had spoken then, addressed as much to herself as to the Tyrant.

"That you are more than blood," I said. "That you are more than what they made of you."

I saw something like hate in her golden eyes when she faced me, but for who I could not tell.

"It wasn't you," Akua quietly said. "So do not gloat, even where you think I cannot see. It wasn't you at all, Catherine."

I slowly nodded. Her face fell and she looked down at her hands.

"It's never just power," she said. "In that much at least you were right. I wanted to take from the fae and wield it as I once did sorcery, but in the end..."

She softly laughed, as if appalled at herself.

"All I could think of was those lessons with my father," Akua said. "The joy in him, when he shared magic with me."

She looked away again.

"It would have been ugly, replacing that with a thimble of power earned through cheap murder," Akua quietly said. "Ugly all the way down."

You told me about your cradle-sister, once, I thought as I watched her. A girl called Zain, whose throat your mother made you cut when you were barely eight years old. And you told me, after, that your regret about that day was that you cut her shallow. That she bled out slower than she needed to because your hand hadn't been steady.

"And so now I return to Hainaut, empty-handed and fool," she scoffed.

Deftly, I went rifling through the many pockets of my cloak until I had what I looked for: two small stones, enchanted by Masego's own hand. Her set of paired stones. She went still as I reached out, slowly prying her fingers open and pressing them into her palm.

"You returned to us," I corrected.

And golden eyes searched me, looking for the lie and finding only truth. I had meant every word. And I also thought: *if you had to cut her throat again, right now, your hand would tremble.*

Her fingers closed around the stone. I withdrew my hand.

I looked up at the blue sky, winning and lost.

—

"The city was made to be held," Sapper-General Pickler said. "And if simple force of arms decides this, it will hold. You have my word on that."

I cut into my slice of beef, chewing thoughtfully. I'd not necessarily meant our shared meal to be about our duties, but I honestly couldn't recall ever having a meal with Pickler where business wasn't touched on at some point. I'd never taken it personally, of course. Pickler didn't draw the line between duty and her personal life the way most people did. To her it was the work that was the centerpiece of her existence and all the rest was secondary. I sometimes wondered if that was why Robber's long-lasting affections for her had never been reciprocated: romance just wasn't something she cared enough about to ever put above her tinkering.

Mind you, the goblin ways of romance were alien enough to me that even if they were engaged in a torrid affair I'd find it rather hard to tell. For one, their culture typically drew no direct link between being a romantic couple and being physically intimate. Sex was about breeding and arranged by the Matrons to

strengthen bloodlines or alliances, nothing else. My understanding of it was that goblins didn't really feel physical desire the way most humans or orcs did, so the... impulse just wasn't there. It was pretty much unheard of for one of their kind to seek a brothel or a fling. It was more of an abstract craving of the other person for them, an itch that didn't require skin to be scratched.

It'd made me rather curious about exactly what it had entailed when Nauk had been courting Pickler, considering he must have known at least as much about goblins as I did, but I'd never quite dared to ask back when we were at the College. And nowadays, what would be the point? He was long dead, and that wound would never heal if I kept picking at it. It wasn't mine alone, anyway. For all that Robber had once made sport of Nauk at every occasion, considering him a rival for Pickler's affections, I could not recall him ever speaking ill of the other man since he'd died. Enemies or not, they had been Rat Company.

That still meant something, to the few of us left.

"It's different when the enemy doesn't break," I reminded her. "The ramp that gets them to the gate is a beautiful killing floor for your engines, but the dead won't ever flee. It'll not be waves so much as a wave, uninterrupted."

"The skeletons aren't the trouble," Robber said, unusually serious. "We can handle the Bones and the Binds, Catherine. The constructs will be a little trickier, but you finally let my people off the leash for a reason."

He bared needle-like fangs in approval. By that he meant I'd cleared all sappers for use of our last goblin munitions, to their riotous cheering. Goblinfire was still restricted, but officers of the rank of tribune and above were allowed to request its deployment in a limited fashion. We'd set aside part of the stock for that purpose, around a third. The rest we had more interesting plans for than just propping up the defence.

"It's not Hannoven or Rhenia," I sighed. "The Volignacs didn't count on the walls cliffside being scaled, or things like beorns and wyrms coming out to play. It's not the gate I'm worried about so much, it was built expecting a fight. It's the rest."

The city of Hannoven was, tales said, essentially a set of ever-taller walls circling a lone mountain. It was widely considered one of the greatest fortresses in all of Calernia even if it had fallen multiple times to ratlings and the Dead King. Rhenia had fallen to neither and was even more daunting a prospect to take: it'd begun as a fortress carved into a cliff but then become a city almost entirely dug within a mountain of solid rock that could be sealed up at will. Both of those great cities had been built without any great weaknesses because the people who'd built

them had learned that Keter always punished weakness. But Hainaut just wasn't built the same, for all its striking presence.

It just hadn't had to withstand the same kind of sustained, brutal warfare the Lycaonese cities had. Most of the time undead invasions that'd crossed the lakes and pierced into southern Procer hadn't even bothered to siege the capital, just gone around the plateau and let the Volignacs hole up in their fortress-city up high. Princess Beatrice had admitted to me that there might actually be some truth to the old unpleasant rumours about some of her ancestors outright letting the dead through when the principalities to the south got too troublesome to deal with. I hoped none of the Lycaonese royals ever heard about that, because it was the sort of thing they would take *very badly*.

"There's not much to be done with walls atop a cliff," Pickler frankly said. "They built with quality stone and saw to the upkeep decently, which passed solid defences on to us. I stand by what I said, Catherine: we can hold this city, so long as Revenants don't pry it away from us."

An expectant gaze followed.

"I won't say the Scourges will be easy meat, or even just the other Revenants," I told her, "but I believe we can win that fight. We prepared, and we have gathered significant Named talent."

I held no illusions that we'd win this without casualties, though. At best we'd lose at least a band of five's worth, but I wouldn't be surprised in the slightest if it were more. We were aiming to snap the Dead King's finest blades, that deed wasn't going to come cheap. *And I'll bet one or two of the Scourges will get away whatever we do, I thought, so that they can come back to haunt us if our armies ever make it to Keter.*

"If you say we can, then I expect we will," Pickler said, and I started in surprise.

That was pretty effusive by her standards. She'd never been heavy handed with praise, at least outside her fields of interest.

"I do wish we had Juniper and Aisha with us, however," she wistfully added. "Generals Bagram and Zola are skilled, but it isn't the same."

Preaching to the Choir, there.

"Agreed," I murmured.

"Bagram doesn't even inspect kits personally," Robber told us, like this was a great offence.

Way I heard it Juniper had picked up that habit from her mother, General Istrid Knightsbane, but while Bagram had served as Istrid's right hand for over a decade he did not seem inclined to continue the tradition. Juniper famously had been, and the chewing outs she'd given recruits who got sloppy were still legend among the old crowd from the Fifteenth.

"Juniper's doing better," I volunteered. "Last word I got was that she was now able to go several days without episodes."

By year's end she should be fit for field command again, though I wasn't signing off on that until Aisha agreed regardless of what the healers might say. The Hellhound wasn't above bullying priests or mages into saying what she wanted, but Aisha wasn't the kind of woman to let herself get forced into saying a damned thing.

"The Peregrine shortchanged us, if it took this long," Pickler coldly said.

"More like Malicia put her back into fucking with her mind," Robber darkly replied. "Another account to settle out before the knife is sheathed, Boss. The old girl bled us a few times too many."

"Praes will be settled," I evenly said. "By treaties if I can, by the sword if I must."

A shiver went up my spine and for an instant I almost felt like someone was looking at us. I pricked my ears with Night, but we were alone. My sudden distraction had been missed by neither of the goblins, Robber having already discreetly bared a knife under the table.

"False alarm," I said, shaking my head. "The wait's driving me mad, I think."

"Won't be long now," Robber said. "It's in the air, yeah?"

Pickler bared pale, sharp teeth.

"They have never fought a proper siege against our sappers before, Catherine," the Sapper-General of Callow said. "And after this, they will never try to again."

We drank to that, and the meal finished on the high note of Pickler showing me her latest improvements on the contraption of leather bands and steel that she'd first made for me years ago, the device that would send a knife up against my palm if I flicked my wrist just right. They helped me try on, and it was with a smile and a flourish that I revealed a sharp little rib-sticker in goblin steel. It would do nicely, I thought, watching my reflection in the side.

Gods knew I'd not lack use for it.

—

The moon was out in full.

It'd been days since anyone had glimpsed a single cloud above the capital, day or night, and this high up the sights bared by that absence were always striking. The rampart where I had gone to stand had become my favourite for the way it gave me a good look at both Hainaut itself, the island of lights and flames that an inhabited city at night turned into, and the vast expanse of sky above. The stars were visible in a way that they rarely were when standing in a city this size, for the valley around us was a ring of unbroken darkness. The dead saw the same be it night or day, and the forges they used were hidden from our sight. If I let my mind wander I could almost imagine that the city was just an island drifting under the stars, the dark around us nothing but dark and deep waters.

Shadows moved against the darkness, cutting out the lights wherever they passed, but I was not afraid. I knew them too well for that. Two great crows, whose feathers somehow seemed darker than the night sky itself, circled slowly above. They were careful never to leave the sky above the city, where wards made it difficult for the Dead King to attempt anything against them, but that was the only concession to prudence they made. I stayed beneath them, the warmth of the Mantle of Woe pulled tight around me as I pulled at my pipe and let curls of smoke rise up like some fleeting offering to my patronesses. They came to me when they'd had their fill, and in Komana I found vexation at having been denied something to hunt.

The Dead King had robbed the Sisters of any prey they might have sought, killing everything that crawled or swam as far as the eye could see. Their talons had not been red into too long for the Youngest Night's taste. Sve Noc took to the rampart I was leaning against, each landing on one of my sides in a smooth flurry of feathers, and I almost smiled when I heard those sharp talons rake at the stone. There would be marks. They seemed in no hurry to talk, so silence hung between us for some time as I breathed in wakeleaf and spewed it out over the edge of the wall. There was hardly even a breeze, tonight.

"The war does not go well," Andronike said.

My fingers tightened around the dragonbone pipe Masego had gifted me. I forced them to loosen, even though what I had been told was nothing less than deadly serious. It was not the war here in the south that the oldest of the sisters would be speaking of.

"How bad?" I quietly asked.

"We sent Vesena Spear-biter and its sigil into the lands of the dead to ravage and draw attention from your own campaign," Komena said. "All souls were lost."

I softly swore. The Vesena had never particularly impressed me even before their last defeat, but they had been led by the Seventh General and been one of the great assets of the Empire Ever Dark.

"Radhoste and Jutren were lost as well," Andronike said. "The Dreamer to a breach in the Gloom, Jutren to an ambush as it pursued."

That made it the Sixth and Tenth General dead as well. Fuck, the finest of the Firstborn were dropping like flies. I'd thought the northern front halfway under control, what the Hells was happening? The goddesses had never been shy about looking at my thoughts, so I did not need to ask the question to get an answer.

"The Dead King has perfected his answers to Night," Andronike said. "With every battle fewer of the Secrets work unimpeded. The war cannot linger, First Under the Night."

"If it lasts too long, we will die out," Komena harshly said. "Our losses are becoming too great and there are..."

"Concerns," Andronike finished.

Not here, I would have been tasked to address them. That meant up north again, and there were not many who might trouble the Sisters among their kind.

"Kurosiv?" I quietly asked.

"It is now the First General," Komena said.

That wasn't an agreement, not quite, but hardly a denial. I grimaced. Kurosiv the All-Knowing had long been considered a leech by the two Sisters, but not one that it would be easy to remove. It was only going to get worse with time, though. The same stuff of which the apotheosis of Sve Noc was made was what Kurosiv was now hoarding, and though that made the drow powerful it also made the Sisters uniquely vulnerable in some ways. I suspected that swallowing Winter had made them more vulnerable in some ways. That power was not one used to being ruled by the same face for too long, and now that it had been devoured by goddesses of theft and murder expecting *loyalty* out of it would be naive.

"If we win here decisively, then we can have Hainaut secured by winter," I said. "After that, when the snows clear, it is Keter we turn to."

"We are aware," Andronike said. "It is why we have come, Catherine Foundling. This battle has our full attention."

My heart skipped a beat and I set down my pipe, studying the crows closer.

"You're not the same crows that were here before I left for the Arsenal," I finally said. "How much of you is actually here, Sve Noc?"

The great crows laughed, the sound of it eerily like caws.

"Half," Komena said.

I froze.

"Of *everything*?" I hissed out.

"This battle," Andronike mildly repeated, "has our full attention."

They had said what they wanted to say, and so found no need to linger. Without bothering with anything as petty as goodbyes, the Sisters dropped off the edge of the rampart and took flight. With dark wings they rose, cutting out even the insolent silver light of the moon as they passed before it. I found my hands were shaking when I picked up my pipe again. I filled it anew, more to have something to do with my hands than hunger for another packet of wakeleaf. Half, Gods save us all. That was... Well, I didn't have to worry about any of the Firstborn here being raised from the dead at least. The Sisters would nip that right in the bud. And Night taken from the undead would form quickly and smoothly, so there was that as well. It was still a heavy investment on their part, to send half of their divinity so far from their seat of power, and I was not quite sure what had driven them to it.

If Komena alone had come I might have called it recklessness, for she was the more hardheaded of the two, but for Andronike to have committed as well? It meant that they no longer considered the war up north one they might feasibly win alone. They were betting on the Grand Alliance because it was the only good bet left to them, not because they felt a particular fondness for our collection of human realms. I let the smoke calm me, thoughts following down the cascade of consequences that Firstborn reverses implied for the war. It might make the dwarves more reluctant to intervene, I concluded with a grimace. The Kingdom Under wasn't interested in picking a fight with Neshamah on behalf of an alliance that was losing, they'd made that much clear: a clear shot at the Crown of the Dead was their prerequisite for sending in their own armies.

With the drow front facing defeat and our three southern ones varying in degrees of deadlock, we did not look like a good horse

to back from the dwarven perspective. Better for them to avoid all-out war with the Dead King and instead concentrate on the strategy of underground containment they'd been implementing for centuries. I breathed out the smoke, eyes closed. Yeah, with that in perspective I could see why Andronike would agree to investing so heavily here in Hainaut. We were highly unlikely to win this war without dwarven involvement, and if we lost the battle over the capital the chances of the Kingdom Under joining the dance were pretty much nonexistent. They'd be rushing to finish their containment, not sparing time for dying human petty kingdoms.

Gods Below, there was even more riding on the Battle of Hainaut than I'd thought.

I stirred myself out of the contemplative daze I'd been falling into. Hakram would still be awake, I figured, and I wanted to pick his brains about this. Not only would his insight be welcome on the consequences of the drow being driven back, but there might still be time to prepare some last defences for Hainaut. An idea or two were beginning to coalesce in the back of my head, and – and the city light up, flares of red light going up in the sky as trumpets sounded.

Hainaut stirred awake and from the corner of my eye I saw a patrol of fantassins bearing torches run towards me, but it was not them I paid attention to. Hand against the crenellation, I leaned over the edge of the wall and looked down. And there they were, keeping to shadows as they moved: pale skeletons beginning to climb the cliff, like a swarm of ants going up a wall. And beyond them the entire sea of deaths stirred, thousands upon thousands of corpses and monsters all moving as one. Roars shattered the quiet of the night, a chorus of wyrms announcing their presence and their hunger for the destruction to come, and below great ladders of black iron were brought to the fore as Keter began unleashing its preparations.

The battle for Hainaut had begun.

Interlude: Blood

"Honour is neither reputation nor law. It cannot be borrowed or bought, bent or bargained with, for it comes from a place that is beyond deception. Fidelity to virtue belongs only to yourself and the Gods, and needs no other witness."

– Extract from the book 'Reflections' by Farah Isbili, second Holy Seljun of Levant

The roar shook the sky, trembling through the starlit dark and down the bones of all who heard it. Razin Tanja of the Grim Binder's Blood, Lord of Malaga, grit his teeth.

"Binders to the bastion," he shouted over the noise. "That is where the beorns will strike first."

He met the gazes of the last of the practitioners that had come north with his father, feeling a pang of pain at the absences he saw in their ranks. Razin had never loved the binders, envious of the talent he had been born without, but he'd grown on the same grounds as them. Most he'd known by name, and a few of the younger he'd gone on skirmishes with. Few were left, and fewer with every battle.

"Do not try to destroy them," he reminded his mages. "Sweep them off the walls as quickly as possible, that is all."

Destruction was better left to the Lanterns or warriors trained in the use of pitch and flame, Razin and his captains had learned. The binders were weaker in traditional offensive spellcraft than Callowan and Proceran mages, but their blood-bound spirits were able to physically push back Keter's monsters in ways that other sorcerers could only dream of.

"We will return victorious, lord, or take the short path home," Ganiya Hundred-Ghost, eldest of the remaining binders, solemnly promised.

Razin sharply nodded.

"Honour to Levant," he said.

"Honour to the Blood," Ganiya fervently replied.

They were gone within moments, fleet-footed on the stone as they sped towards the bastion where the first of the enemy dead would reach the top of the walls. Razin's sworn sword kept close around him, and the Lantern that had taken oath to protect him for the battle as well, as he went to the edge of the eastern rampart and looked over. The dead were coming in waves, he thought, eyes narrowing as the moonlight revealed the abominations of bone scaling sheer cliffs. The skeletons were many but also slow and they would not reach the wall for a long time. It was the monsters scaling the cliff that would draw first blood, the massive bear-like abomination called beorns that were clawing their way up. Inside their bellies they held companies of lesser dead which they vomited before rampaging, and for that reason it was the great bastion to Razin's north they would target.

They'd want flat grounds and room to spew out their soldiers, to create a beachhead atop the walls. Keter usually preferred taking ground than lives, early in fight, knowing it could afford the losses to get into a superior position before the fighting became heavy. It also meant that Razin Tanja had been entirely aware, even if many of his captains had not been, that the warriors he had sent to guard the bastion were not being rewarded with hours

by fires in a place where the wind did not bite too deep. The warriors in the bastion were going to die. Perhaps not all of them, but most. The Lord of Malaga had made his decision with that knowledge in the back of his head, whispering. And of the three captains regularly commanded warriors in the bastion, he had chosen one who was of his great supporters and two who were not. His loyal captain he had sent to obscure his intention, should men think on this later, and now that decision was like ash in his mouth for it was that man who now held the bastion. This, he suspected, would follow him in his dreams for months to come.

It had been easier, back when Razin still believed war to be a glorious thing.

A game of daring and cleverness that the sharp stakes only further gilded. That was the way it was, in the old stories, with the victors returning home covered in loot and honour and the defeated slunk away to lick their wounds until a chance to even the score came. Warriors died but they died in honour, proving their worth, and the deeds done in war made them immortal – perhaps not worthy of the distinction of being added to the Rolls, but kept alive past the end of flesh through stories and songs. Razin had believed in this, he'd begun to realize, much like a man dying of thirst would believe that beyond the hill lay a river. Razin Tanja of the Grim Binder's Blood had not a speck of the sorcery that had made his line famous: war had been the only way he was ever going to be able to distinguish himself, make up for the lack he'd been born with.

And so Razin had embraced the ways of blood and steel, devoted himself wholeheartedly. He'd practiced with the blade until his palms bled and bones ached, he'd learned to move captains with words and sung the praises of the honourable ways of the Dominion of Levant. Of their inherent savage virtue, born of stripping away all the pretty lies and false righteousness the nations around Levant coated their own ways in.

Then he'd watched Careful Yannu kill his father in an honour duel, and it was like scales had been ripped off of his eyes.

"My lord," one of his men quietly said, shaking him out of his thoughts. "We must move. We have stayed in the same place for too long, Revenants might come for your head."

Razin gave the horrors below one last look, hand resting against the pommel of his sword. They'd be here before too long.

"We will do our part," the Lord of Malaga murmured. "On my honour."

The vulture had broken itself forcing its way through the wards that protected the skies above Hainaut, but it had gone through.

Though it was in freefall, the necromantic abomination no longer animated, it had still served the Dead King's purpose with success: on the creature's back, Tariq glimpsed the shape of a Revenant huddling close. It had infiltrated the city, and when it reached the ground would no doubt begin to wreak havoc. The Grey Pilgrim watched the vulture drop like a stone for a heartbeat, then lengthened his stride. The Enemy would not have risked one of the Scourges so carelessly, but there were no Revenants that were not dangerous. Even one whose Bestowal had been weak whilst they lived would still be able to cause a great deal of chaos and death, if left unchecked.

Tariq let the pull of chance guide his path through the city, passing by the orderly ranks of Callowan companies heading for the gates and bands of haphazard fantassins being exhorted to move quicker by their officers. Few saw him, for he did not care to be seen. The old man's face tightened as the Ophanim whispered in his ear, warning him that he would not arrive in time. He'd been close to where the vulture and Revenant were to fall, but not quite close enough. He was two blocks away when the large shape smashed into a house with a thunderous crash, though not so far that he could not discern that the Revenant had nimbly leapt away before the impact. So where had it gone?

"Rooftops, do you think?" he asked his old friends.

The Ophanim murmured their agreement.

"The furtive sort always take to the rooftops," Tariq complained. "It is unkind. My knees aren't what they used to be."

A passage through the Ways would allow him to close the distance, but also reveal his presence – most Revenants could sense the touch of Twilight on Creation. He would have to move the old-fashioned way. Tariq went through the house that had been smashed, using the ruin as a path to the roof, and before long he was on rough tiles and cocking a white eyebrow at his surroundings. He'd found the cloaked silhouette almost instantly, skittering atop another roof as it was, but not only had it yet to notice him it was also... a streak of fire coming from down in the street interrupted his thoughts, and promptly solved the mystery of why the Revenant had been paying closer attention to the streets below than its immediate surroundings.

The Revenant ducked under the flame, proving it had kept exceptional reflexes even in death.

The mage that'd tossed a spell at the cloaked Revenant cursed loudly in High Tyrian, warning the two warriors by her side that they were going to have a fight. Tariq moved silently across

rooftops as the Revenant hesitated for a moment then leapt down, moving in a streak of speed. Not so swift that one of the two warriors – boys, he now discerned – did not move between it and the mage with a raised shield, forcing it back with a measured swing of his sword. The other boy darted forward as the Revenant drew back. A straight-edge sword was swung out, but the dead Bestowed revealed a blade of its own in a glimmer of moonlight on metal and caught it.

“Incise,” the Page disdainfully said, adjusting his blow and shattering the Revenant’s sword.

It had not been simple strength, Tariq caught, but instead precision. With the point of his blade, the Page had struck at the weakest point of the sword wielded by the undead and struck it with all his might. An adjustment done in a fraction of a moment, too. Impressive, for one his age. But he was still green. Having moved behind the Revenant, hidden by the shadow of a tall chimney, the Pilgrim watched as the Revenant abandoned the blade and simply slugged the young Proceran in the face with inhuman strength. The Page rocked back, and when a knife flicked out in the Revenant’s other hand came close to getting his throat cut – the Squire, stepped in once more, taking the blow on his shield and forcing back the Revenant.

The Apprentice, with a triumphant cry, landed a spell on the cloaked figure’s side: a streak of blue flame ate up the entire cloak in second, forcing the Revenant to throw it away even as the Squire closed distance and battered him down with strikes of his shield. Though it was a brutal and inelegant method, Tariq noted that it succeeded at putting the Revenant on the ground and keeping it there.

“Come on, Gaetan,” the Squire hissed. **“I don’t have anything that can-”**

“Incise,” the Page panted out angrily, severing the Revenant’s head.

Sharpness and precision, Tariq decided. That was the nature of the aspect. The Ophanim murmured what their own sight revealed, which had him cocking an eyebrow. ‘Incise’, it seemed, would be significantly stronger when dealing wounds than killing blows. There was a sense of frivolity to it, of defiance. The Page’s nose was bloody, and he would likely get a black eye out of this if he wasn’t healed. The Pilgrim, after a moment, decided not to reveal himself. A black eye was always a good lesson, for a young Bestowed, and he would not rob them of the pleasure of their victory by revealing he’d watched over them as they won it. He had, after all, been entirely unneeded here.

Providence pulled at Tariq’s feet and he slipped away in the dark, feeling a call towards the east. The old man’s lips

tightened. That was the wall, he knew, that was held by his countrymen.

The Grey Pilgrim took back to the streets, fleet of foot and clad in dusk.

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He turned aside the skeleton's sword with his buckler, letting it scrabble against the hide-covered wood, and placed his strike: the blade ripped into the bone of the neck, severing the spine after two wild hacks. The skeleton collapsed, necromancy unmade, and Razin Tanja breathed out. He did not have long to rest, as a flicker of movement to the side had him ducking to avoid a well-thrown javelin that bit into the shield of the sworn sword to his right.

"Forward," the Lord of Malaga shouted, "forward for Levant!"

A roar answered as the last of the dead the beorns had spat out were driven back from the bastion by a tightening shield wall, those that weren't smashed instead pushed off the edge so that might be broken by the fall. It was a small, petty victory but the warriors had won it and they shouted themselves hoarse afterwards. Razin raised his blade, claiming his own share of the acclaim, but then praised Captain Alezon – who'd held the bastion until reinforcements could arrive, and died holding to that duty. Razin had liked the man, counted him almost as a friend. And he had sent him here to die. Sometimes he wondered if he was truly better than what he wanted to replace, but when he did the searing clarity of that night after the Graveyard came back to him.

How clear it had been, in that moment, that the Blood were no longer what they had been meant to be. How much difference was there really, between the red-handed sons and daughters of the Blood and the rapacious princes their sacred ancestors had risen in rebellion to drive out? With the Procerans gone the blades had not been sheathed. They'd just turned them on each other instead. Like dogs in a too-small kennel, snapping and snarling. It must end, Razin had realized, or they would ruin their homes and the Dominion with it. Yet for all that he had tried to embrace this truth, the practice of it had been... difficult. Dreams were always prettier before they were dragged to the ground, where all the mud of practicalities sullied them.

Razin Tanja had not become Lord of Malaga – the first ever elected away from ancient Tanja grounds, through a trick of procedure – without incurring debts and troubles, which now both had to be settled. There were captains in his service who would not hear of straying from the old ways, of making pacts of peace and ending raids when they returned home, and he could not yet afford to lose their support. His humiliating defeat had

Sarcella, even if dealt by the hand of the Black Queen herself, remained a scar on his reputation. And though some here and at home had well received the announcement of his betrothal to Aquiline Osená, others were openly dubious.

Tartessos and Malaga had long fought over wealthy territories laying between them, he had been reminded, what was now to be of them? What of the deaths come of the last wars, must they go forever unavenged? There was no honour in these surrenders, warriors grumbled.

Aquiline had admitted to him in private that some of her captains had been mutinous over the notion as well, in no small part because as long as she had been unwed her hand in marriage had been considered the greatest prize that a captain in the service of the Osená might hope to win. Worse, the most ardent supporters of their union tended to be captains who backed the marriage because it would secure the southern border of the Osená and allow them to send their full might to war against the Ifriqui of Vaccei, their old enemies of the Brigand's Blood. Sometimes it felt like every step forward they took was followed by two steps back. Yet Razin knew nothing but rain came from throwing curses at the sky, and so he used what he had at hand: the war. It was ugly work, but Razin and Aquiline traded blood for hope.

The captains that would never bend were granted the honour of leading vanguards, men and women more farsighted raised to replace them. With steel and deeds they bound warriors to them, by oaths and debts and the hard companionship of those sharing battle, and inch by inch they had gained ground. Lady Itima Ifriqui of Vaccei would be an enemy so long as she lived, but she was old and her heir Moro amenable to a peace. Careful Yannu loomed tall over them all, undefeated in honour duels, but for all that the older man was accruing honours like speaking for Levant at the Arsenal, he had no allies beyond his own kin. And though they were all wary of the Holy Seljun, beyond Wazim Isbili lay a greater power still. The Peregrine smiled upon their efforts, his approval as the blessing of the pilgrim's star.

And still it was damned ugly work, trying to move Levant. It cost too much blood, and Razin almost missed the days when the scales had been over his eyes and he'd still believed there had been glory in sending men to die.

"Prepare yourselves," Razin said. "It will be a long night, and there are many victories yet to claim."

Already he could see a beorn attacking positions to the south of the bastion, aiming perhaps not to take the wall but instead to spew out its load of soldiers in the city itself, and he could only hope that Aquiline would send the Lanterns there on time. His binders were resting and the priests from Procer had yet to arrive, save for the healers that were already preparing beds for

the wounded in the nearby barracks. As for himself, he would stay here until the next batches of pitch arrived at least. Longer than that would be risking – a man in shoddy hide armour, barefoot and armed with a great sword, landed in a roll among the warriors nearest to the edge.

“Good evening,” the Drake grinned.

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The Barrow Sword squinted.

“That’s not the Pale Knight,” he finally said.

“Your wisdom is peerless,” the Vagrant Spear solemnly replied.

Ishaq rolled his eyes. Sidonia was not entirely unpleasant, for one of the Blood, but she seemed to believe it her oathsworn duty to needle him at every opportunity.

“It’s just the Drake,” the Berserker said. “We can take him.”

Of that Ishaq was not so certain, but he would not outright disagree. The three of them were strong in close quarters, and not without talents that would allow them to stem the tide of that Scourge’s healing. More than that, the last two members of his band of five had teeth beyond what mere blades could bring to bear.

“Um,” the Harrowed Witch hesitantly said. “Shouldn’t we... do something? He’s killing soldiers.”

The Drake had wasted no time in beginning to cut up anyone that moved around him, it was true. With that greatsword of his he smashed through shields and blades alike, slaughtering with ease even as warriors kept trying to close around him on all sides so he’d not have room to swing the large blade. Useless, when the Scourge was probably capable of shattering a shield with a kick anyway. It was like ants trying to wrestle a lizard.

“We are meant to handle the Axeman,” the Blessed Artificer regretfully said. “If we spend ourselves against another, there will be a gap in the defences.”

“He’s a Scourge,” Sidonia grunted. “Killing him is still a win. We should strike.”

The Berserker nodded in fervent agreement. Sentiment was in favour, Ishaq decided, but should he give the order? Much as he disliked to admit it, he probably couldn’t afford to let the lordling ruling Malaga get himself killed. It would deal a hard blow to the morale of the Tanja warriors, and the Black Queen would have Ishaq’s hide for it. On the other hand, letting Tanja warriors die would win him favour with the Grave Binder – who the

Binder's Blood despised – and even if he intervened there was no guarantee that the young man would honour him for it. Blood only ever felt the need to owe debts to Blood, like honour was a drink only they could partake of. *It'd be bad tactics to do nothing*, Ishaq finally decided.

"We strike," the Barrow Sword said. "As was planned."

He half-expected the Artificer to argue with him, but though she looked displeased she refrained. Perhaps she was sensing her opinion was not shared by most. No challenge was offered, though, so Ishaq rose from his crouch and took the lead. Sidonia was quicker on the run, but also a lot more fragile. The ancient armour of bronze around him moved without a sound, smooth as if oiled from enchantments older than he dared to imagine, and the Barrow Sword unsheathed Pinon. The ancient blade hummed, tasting of the death in the air, and without a word Ishaq leapt from the rooftop to the edge of the rampart. From the corner of his eye he saw a warrior thrown in the air, missing an arm as she screamed in pain. The Drake was merciless.

As he began to push his way through the throng of warriors he heard the Spear and the Berserker land behind him, Zoe snarling at the Malagans to get out of her way. Beyond the ring of shields he glimpsed binder-magic at work, creatures of dirt and ash trying to drive back the Scourge, but it was a bad match. The Drake was both strong and difficult to kill, the spirits did little but rip up flesh that healed within a heartbeat and they were failing at pushing him over the edge. Now, though, he was here. Steps measured as he advanced the Barrow Sword breathed deep of the evening air. Ah, opportunity. Was there ever anything that tasted sweeter? A spirit-wyvern was cut in half, the blade that did it biting shallow of the stone beneath them, and the Drake slunk out. Grinning wildly, his hide armour already tatters, the Revenant glanced at Ishaq curiously.

"Villain?" he asked.

It must be the beard, Ishaq decided. Surely he did not look *that* villainous?

"You wound me, friend," the Barrow Sword smiled, tapping his ancient blade against his heart.

Pinon hummed at the touch, thirsty beast that she was.

"That's the plan," the Drake agreed, darting forward.

Ishaq raised his sword, but the speed had been enough that the Revenant might have startled him into an unwise parry if this hadn't been what he was after in the first place.

"Honour to the Blood," the Vagrant Spear gleefully howled, smashing into the Drake's side.

Light roiled and screamed as she severed an arm, but the Revenant only laughed – abandoning his greatsword, he caught his own limb and threw it at her face as a fresh one grew anew. Ishaq, though was not intending to just stay and watch. Sidonia was forced back by a wild swing of the greatsword, retreating smoothly with both hands on her spear, and before the backswing could return Ishaq closed the distance. The Revenant struck at his armour but the ancient bronze mail took it without flinching, and the mistake allowed him to get a good cut of his own in: across the face, through one eye and the mouth. The Drake was unmoved but Ishaq stayed in close, elbowing the wrist trying to get the greatsword around him and hammering forehead to forehead to drive the Revenant back.

Which he did, eyes wild as he put fingers to his already-healing wound.

"That sword's not Dominion work," the Drake coldly said.

Pinon sang, devouring the last bits of soul it'd managed to pull away from the Dead King's bindings.

"There are all sorts of treasures in barrows, if one has the nerve to take them up," Ishaq smiled.

Not that he would have been able to put his sword down now, even should he wish to.

"Well," the Drake said, "it'll make this a little interesting, at least."

The Malagan warriors had withdraw, wisely, though more likely it was because to their eyes the affair looked closed enough to an honour duel. Those were not interfered with without incurring great shame, and did Ishaq's entire homeland not just *quake* at the very shadow of shame? Like hound on a leash, only so enamoured of the prison they sang its praises in song. He glanced at Sidonia, who nodded back, and as one they struck. The Drake howled in laughter, and the dance began anew. The Scourge was fast and strong, nimbler with that monstrous sword than he had any right to be, but they were neither of them unskilled. The Vagrant Spear feigned a low bit only to snake a hit at the throat, forcing the Drake to bat it away, and without batting an eye Ishaq slashed at the undead's back.

The flesh grew back. The soul did not, and Pinon sang with glee. It liked taking from souls already claimed best, preferring Binds and Revenants to the living.

Ishaq withdrew, though not quite quickly enough for his face to be spared the edge of the returning greatsword. A thick cut across the cheek, dripping blood against the edge of his mouth. He swallow a lick, smiling, and saw fury bloom in the Scourge's eyes. It did not like losing parts of itself, no matter how small they might be.

"That'll be enough, children," the Drake said. "I'm being told to stop playing."

And behind him, as if summoned, the hulking shape of a beorn climbed over the ledge and looked down at them through a gaping maw, roaring out.

"You have a bear," the Barrow Sword, conceded. "But we have *her*."

He jutted a thumb behind him, where the Berserker was slowly advancing. Her body was jerking wildly, eyes turned bloodshot and hair looking like it'd been shot through with thorns. Muscles grew, and as her face turned monstrous the Berserker hacked out a breath.

"**Rage**," she snarled.

The beorn swatted at her, but she caught the paw with the flat of her blade. Both wavered, for a moment, before she smashed the great limb into the floor with a triumphant howl. The Drake looked a little unnerved, and Ishaq frankly couldn't blame him. Zoe wasn't particularly able to tell friends from foe in that state and shaking her out of it tended to be... difficult.

"I always get the worst assignment," the Drake sighed. "Would it kill that prick in his fancy armour to take the vanguard, one of these days?"

"I sympathize," Ishaq smiled. "Please, friend, allow me to relieve you of your burdens."

The Barrow Sword moved, and the Vagrant Spear with him.

The dance resumed.

—

It was a good fight, Sidonia thought as she pricked the Drake's neck and send Light howling into his body.

Though bones snapped and flesh burned, the Revenant swatted at her and she was forced to withdraw a few steps until the Barrow Sword commanded their foe's attention. It was a fight worthy of being added to the Rolls, even though Ishaq was one Below's and so sundered from honour. The Berserker was ripping into the beorn that'd come up over the ledge, now with her bare hands since she had used her sword to nail shut the beast's maw, which left the

two of them room to handle the Drake properly. The abomination was still far from death, but then they had yet to reveal their own killing strokes. The Scourges always had surprises, and so their opponents must have some as well.

They went another round with death, this time Ishaq taking the lead. The Drake was wary of the Barrow Sword's blade, which though grave-goods and so proscribed seemed particularly suited to slaying Revenants. Ishaq went forward aggressively as Sidonia circled around the back, baiting the Drake into a warning swing, and immediately the Vagrant Spear struck. Three quick steps and extending her body like the spear she wielded, the tip of her steel finding the back of the Revenant's head – only he danced to the side, sword flicking back to bat away her spear before he caught Ishaq by the edge of his mail even as the Barrow Sword carved into his flank.

"That's all we'll get," the Drake said. "Get on with it."

With a heave, he threw the Barrow Sword upwards into the sky and turned to Sidonia with a hard grin. Half a heartbeat later a black-feathered arrow sprouted in Ishaq's throat as he still rose in the air. And as if a veil had been torn down, an undead drake was revealed. Batting its wings half a hundred feet away from the bastion, above the height of the fight. Atop the creature stood a single archer. *The Hawk*, Sidonia thought, and felt a glimmer of fear. She had no time for more, as the Drake was on her and he was not an opponent she could afford to be distracted against. Still, Zoe must be warned as much as she could be in the throes of her rage.

"The Hawk is here, Berserker," Sidonia shouted. "Watch-"

An arrow sprouted in the villainess forehead even as she threw the beorn off the wall, staggering her for a moment. *Ashen Gods*, the Vagrant Spear thought. Mere moments and already two of her band were dead. Only, instead of collapsing the Berserker screamed in utter fury before ripping off one of the crenels and tossing the large stone at the drake.

"Impressive," the Drake complimented even as he struck.

Sidonia let the worries sink away into nothing. She would not survive this, if she let the world command her attention. Eyes on the enemy's blade, she nimbly withdrew two steps and smiled. Yes, this was better. Her and the foe, nothing else. If death came through arrow, let it. She would end her life in honour. Breathing out, she circled again as the Revenant studied her. He feigned with a brusque step forward but she did not bite, choosing her angle. Right behind the shoulder there was a point where the Scourge could not even parry, the arm simply did not bend right. If she could get him to move... She rushed forward, earning a swing, and slid under the horizontal strike.

She rolled around the kick that followed, coming up in a crouch with the point of her spear upwards. At precisely the right angle Sidonia rose, and to the strike she added the secret Creation had bestowed upon her: that so long as you struck with the soul instead of the hand, there was nothing you could not **Pierce**. The blade of her spear slid through the armpit, shearing through flesh and muscle and bone as blood sprayed and she bisected the Drake. Her spearhead emerged through the other armpit and she ripped it free as she stepped back, blood flecking her face paint. Only, she realized with dim horror, just enough had healed by the time she withdrew the spear that strings of skin had kept the severed parts together.

"Good blow," the Drake praised. "My turn."

The angle was wrong. She knew it even as she struck at the swing coming at her, trying to change how it would strike. Instead the spearhead scraped along the side of the greatsword, changing nothing, and with a swallowed scream she felt her enemy's edge cut halfway through her arm and outright through the shaft of her spear. The Drake snorted, socking her in the stomach and letting her stumble to the ground.

"The Tanja lord, Hawk," the Scourge called out. "I'm not in the mood for pursuit, get him now."

And from the corner of her eye, Sidonia saw the arrow fly. Finding a path through the press of bodies and shields with impossible accuracy, as if eager to snatch out the life of the Lord of Malaga. And it made it but an inch away from the Tanja's throat, before the sour-faced spectre of a young man became visible and unhinged his jaw to swallow it whole. The Harrowed Witch, Sidonia realized with dim relief. She rolled to her feet, bleeding but unbowed, and breathed out. She still had two aspects to use. Only the Drake seemed disinclined to allow her to use them, already on her and swinging. Barren Mercy, Sidonia thought. She would have to cushion the blow and she raised her hand...

The point of the Barrow Sword's eerie blade punched through the Drake's belly, Ishaq looking bloodless but very much alive.

"Gods but I *hate* dying," the Barrow Sword hissed. "Do you have any idea how many souls that sets me back?"

Well, Sidonia thought, rising to her feet with the two halves of her spear. Perhaps today's deeds would not have to be added to the Rolls by another's hand, after all.

—

Razin had known this fear before.

During the battle he had not yet known would be called the Princes' Graveyard, witnessing the Firstborn unleashed under cover of the dark. The way death had just... ensued, and they'd all been powerless to stop it for those few Bestowed with the privilege of doing otherwise by the Ashen Gods. It had stuck in his throat then, that fear, and it did now even as his life was saved from some Revenant's murderous whim by the whim of some clever Bestowed using a ghost. And he knew, he did, that the intelligent decision made was to leave. To stay behind a shield wall and retreat out of sight, where the archer could not easily pursue beyond the city wards. And yet instead, Razin Tanja felt his jaw clench. *Is this the sum of us? We die in droves while the demigods settle the score, little more than an afterthought for either side.*

No, he thought. Enough.

"Warriors of Malaga," he shouted, "*shield wall.*"

They would not be ghosts before death even bothered to find them, spectators to the end of times. If they were to stand here tonight, it would be sword in hand. A shiver of surprise went through the warriors, of hesitation, but in the end he was the Lord of Malaga and this was war. The shields went up, sword rose.

"Binders, on my word," Razin said. "Knock that drake out of our fucking sky."

An arrow streaked towards him again, but the apparition swallowed it once more. Who did it belong to, he wondered? He would have to find out. Thanks were in order.

"Forward, sons and daughters of Levant," Razin Tanja screamed.

"The Blessed Artificer requests that you unleash the binders right before she acts, your lordship."

Razin almost stabbed the woman who'd just addressed him in surprise, as a heartbeat ago he would have been sure there was absolutely no one standing next to him. Ashen Gods, how long had she been there?

"And when is that?" the Lord of Malaga asked, steadying his breath.

"In..." the young woman addressing him trailed off, cocking her head to the side, "seven heartbeats now."

Cursing, Razin immediately ordered for the binders to strike even as his shield wall advanced. Bound spirits flew out, gathering substance from their surroundings as they did, and struck at the archer and the undead drake in a storm. On the ground the Revenant was carving at the shield wall, slicing through shields

like butter, but with the Barrow Sword and the Vagrant Spear striking at him he could not afford more than a few idle blows and he was steadily losing ground. Now there was little but a strip at the edge of the bastion left to fight over, and there the monstrous Bestowed the other had brought was still raging. It snatched the Revenant by the foot and started wildly smashing him around, the other two Bestowed backing away carefully.

"Gods, let this work," the young witch by his side murmured.

The sky lit up with Light. Streak after streak gathered in a circle, like ceiling made of spears, and every last one was angled down at the storm his binders had made. The spirits, he now grasped, had not been meant by his allies to kill the archer but to blind it.

Light shone until it blinded them all, and like a tide it fell.

—

The Grey Pilgrim's steps stuttered.

It was, Tariq thought, almost like getting a glimpse of years to come. The devastation visited unto the bastion seemed like a small thing, compared to the cheers of his countrymen defending it. The sky was filled with smoke and the Drake was still there, pinned to the ground by sorcery and swords and the bruising grip of the Berserker, but it was the living that had caught his eye. Razin Tanja, the young man that was half the hope he saw for his home rising above itself, reluctantly but honestly clasping arms with the Barrow Sword as he just had with the Vagrant Spear. Warriors roaring in approval. It was a different world, he thought. One he had not been born to.

He'd come here to take care of Levant, but Levant had taken care of itself.

It was pride he now felt welling up in his belly, but grief as well. There was still some aid he could lend, at least, and that much he would offer. The Pilgrim made his way through the crowd, warriors respectfully parting for him, and though offering smiles and nods where appropriate his stride led directly to the Drake. The Berserker had just pulped his stomach, but those eyes were wide open and aware. They also filled with fear, when he approached, as they should.

"Drake," Tariq gently smiled.

"No," the Revenant hissed. "Not you, I was so close I was—"

Light lashing out, the Grey Pilgrim pulled open a gate into Twilight beneath the Scourge. He struggled, but there was no avoiding this while bound. Screaming, convulsing, the Revenant

fell into the gate and turned to ash. And this time, when the tooth flew out towards the edge of the rampart, Tariq was ready. He snatched it out of the air and the Ophanim hissed with anger at the abomination, their will joining his as he wove Light and tightened his grip. Dust flowed out from between his fingers, slipping into the gate before he finally allowed it to close. The Pilgrim opened his mouth to speak into the hushed silence that'd followed, but it was a great roar that broke it instead.

The Berserker spasmed in pain, half a dozen arrows stuck in her body and three through her forehead, but from the monstrous shape she'd turned into she slowly turned back into a woman. The Ophanim whispered and Tariq's hands tightened.

"Is there anything we can do?"

Silence. There was no. The Berserker's rage ended, leaving only a mortal behind, and that mortal did not breathe. Only the wrath had kept her alive.

Keter always had the last word.

Interlude: Song

"I wrote this work because it is our habit as a people to ignore the worst of our history and gild its mediocrities, and to speak against this practice will see you castigated as unpatriotic. This is more than wrong, it is dangerous. We must not snuff out the lights of our common soul by placating the darkness, else what manner of a world are we laying the foundation for?"

— Extract from the conclusion of 'The Labyrinth Empire, or, A Short History of Procer', by Princess Eliza of Salamans

Her lips had gone dry, so Beatrice Volignac made herself drink from her cup so it would not show. The wine was watered, she was not foolish enough to partake while a battle was being waged, but the taste of the stout Cantal red was bracing anyway. The Princess of Hainaut, or more truthfully the capital and a thin stretch of the old southern borderlands, set down her golden cup after having wet her lips and leaned down to look over the maps she'd had her footpads bring to the war room years ago. This was not a war council, for there was precious little planning left to be made, but given the prominence of the people seated in the salon where Beatrice's ancestors had once received visiting royalty any decision made here had the potential to make or break the defence of the city.

Everyone had a man or a woman at the table, so to speak. The Army of Callow in the city was led by the seniormost of their

generals, an aging orc who went by the name of Bagram, but while the general was here his authority was mitigated by another's presence: Lady Vivienne Dartwick, heiress-designate to the throne of Callow. That the former heroine only rarely used her authority in military matters only reinforced its weight when she *did* use it, an elegant sort of artifice worthy of a woman with Lady Dartwick's excellent reputation with the Highest Assembly. There was some rejoicing among Beatrice's fellow royals at the notion that Lady Dartwick might be sitting the throne in a few years, though no doubt the prospect of no longer having to deal with someone who could drown an army when cross had played a role as well as Dartwick's personal qualities.

For the Dominion it was Captain Nabila, the stout commander of the Alavan forces within the alliance, who was well-understood to be the least of the three great Levantine commanders. Both Aquiline Osen and Razin Tanja were Blood, it lent a lustre to their authority that the other woman could not hope to match. The Iron Prince himself was here too, having left the command at the southern wall to Princess Mathilda of Neustria, with his empty sleeve folded over the arm he'd lost defending this very city three years back. The sole representative for the Firstborn was a certain Mighty Sagasbord, dark-skinned and quiet with a bent for the sardonic when it did break its silence. Prince Arsene despised it, Beatrice had learned, not that the dark elf particularly seemed to care. Theirs was not a culture that quailed at the thought of making powerful enemies.

It gave her the creeps.

"- eastern wall drove back an assault by Revenants and beorns," Captain Nadila shared. "Lord Razin led the defence, with assistance from a band of five Bestowed under the Vagrant Spear."

Beatrice's eyes sharpened. From what she recalled, that was the band with the Barrow Sword. The same man the Black Queen plainly meant to make her lieutenant. Somehow the princess doubted he'd been put under the command of another. That had the smell of Dominion politics, something she figured she ought to have as little to do with as possible.

"Only assaults on the walls," General Bagram growled. "Like we called it right. They won't touch the front gate until they've drawn out as many as our soldiers as they can."

"They'll keep testing us with Revenants," the Iron Prince said. "To suss out what Chosen we have at hand. Old Bones like to know the face of the opposition before he puts his back into the swing."

"The Revenants will be handled by Named," Lady Dartwick calmly said. "A defence plan was designed by Queen Catherine and the

White Knight, before his departure. Our concern is to be the traditional forces."

Beatrice cleared her throat, claiming attention.

"Have our Firstborn friends confirmed our suspicions?" she asked.

Mighty Sagasbord coolly smiled. Its Chantant when it spoke was eerily perfect, and Beatrice knew enough of drow to know such proficiency could only be gained by wholesale slaughter of her countrymen. As always, that serene mask over the madness made her skin crawl.

"We dig for truth still," Mighty Sagasbord said. "But the Tomb-Maker itself leads us, Hainaut Princess. There is no need for... uneasiness."

That it could tell she feared it only made it more unpleasant to deal with.

"There's not much to do but wait," Prince Klaus Papenheim gruffly said. "No dishonour in that, it's the way war is. Some of us should try to get some sleep: the dead will try to run us into the ground, it's one of Keter's favourite tricks."

As all here knew, but when such a renowned veteran spoke the words it gave others the opening to do so without shaming themselves. The Iron Prince was not without his kindnesses, for all that like most Lycaonese he cared little for social graces.

"I may retire for a few hours, then," Princess Beatrice said. "It would be better to be fully rested when I relieve Captain-General Catalina from her command on the western wall."

Captain Nadila snorted, eyeing her with open disdain.

"Will you be returning to your palace for it, Princess Beatrice?" the painted Levantine asked.

The orc on the other side of the table chuckled. General Bagram received a cocked eyebrow from Lady Dartwick for it, but she took no further issue and he looked undaunted. It was the Iron Prince's unsurprised face that stung the most, though. Like he'd expected her to be the first to retire. Beatrice's fingers closed around her cup. Perhaps he had. It was not disdainful, but even now the Iron Prince thought of Alamans as *soft* – always it was they who balked, who slowed, who mutinied even as others bled to drive the dead out of their lands. And that belief, Beatrice Volignac found it reflected in the eyes of everyone here. She'd had it directed at her before, the look, when people thought that because she was fat it meant she was weak or stupid. But it wasn't about her this time, was it? Not really.

It was all Alamans that were being looked down on. And she could see the shape of it, almost. What great names had come of her people in this war? Cordelia Hasenbach was Lycaonese, Rozala Malanza was Arlesite and even the Kingfisher Prince, Frederic Goethal, preferred the company of northerners to his own kind while openly disdaining the games of the Highest Assembly. And it was unfair, Beatrice thought, for her people were brave. They were gallant and stubborn and love freedom more fiercely than any other under the sun, but what did it matter to these few before her now? All they saw was an Alamans shackle around the Grand Alliance's foot. And this was larger than Beatrice, than House Volignac or perhaps even royalty, but here and now it was her that the looks stung.

"I am not yet sure," Princess Beatrice evenly replied.
"Regardless, I will first go to our rampart and assess the situation there."

It was her home being fought for, she thought. Sleep could wait for a while still.

—

Catalina Ferreiro had become Captain-General of the *Ligera Bandera* a mere two years before the war against Keter began, an appointment that had been like a noose around her neck ever since. She had been a compromise candidate, she knew, that her decent battlefield record and noble lineage had seen her elected by the officers because they have her more respectable standing in the eyes of the rank and file. The powerful banner-captains of the *Ligera* had meant to use her as a figurehead while they privately continued the same infighting that'd paralyzed the greatest fantassin company of the Principate so badly it had been unable to even take a contract for the Tenth Crusade. Catalina had thought herself clever, playing off Vargerass against Capistrant until they'd spent themselves against each other and she had enough support to muzzle Garrido on her own.

The prize she had won, unfortunately, was uncontested command of the largest mercenary company on Calernia just as the first signs of the end times were glimpsed the north. As Old Teresa was fond of saying, the Gods never missed an opportunity to piss in the gruel of fantassins.

"Pitch and torches," the Captain-General bellowed. "Burn that thing or we'll lose the bastion."

Catalina preferred the spear, but it was a useless weapon against the dead so she'd taken to the halberd instead: with a grunt, she smashed the axehead into the flank of the skeleton coming for her and toppled it over the edge of the rampart. Her personal guard swept forward, smashing into the loose formation of undead trying to keep her from reinforcing the bastion where the *Folies Rouges*

were being hacked apart by ghouls and the beorn that'd carried them up the cliff. Captain Reinald had done well against the first wave, but the second had caught him by surprise and now the entire western wall was at risk. If they lost that bastion... already the dead were trying to land ladders to solidify the beachhead. Flicking a glance back through the sweaty locks matting her helmet, she caught sight of the approaching torches. No more time to waste.

"Ligera," Catalina shouted.

"Faith kept through fire," her soldiers shouted back,

They charged against into the dead, whose formation the undead officers had not been quick enough to salvage. The Captain-General paced herself, picking her foes carefully – a thrust of her halberd pushed another corpse over the wall, a sweeping descent shattered another's helmet and broke the foul magics keeping it moving – even as the front ranks of her mercenary company plowed through the enemy line. A clear path to the bastion, she thought.

"Torchmen," she screamed, *"with-"*

Her words were drowned out by a thunderous roar as the beorn that'd been tearing at the fantassins in the bastion abandoned its playthings there, instead leaping down onto the rampart and casually sweeping half a dozen men off the wall into the city below. Some might survive, Catalina thought, though they might not wish they had.

"Aim for the beorn," the Captain-General of the Ligera Bandera calmly said. *"On my signal."*

Another seven men dead, the great abomination crushing them as easily as a boot would an ant.

"Hold," Catalina Ferreiro said.

Another handful dead, the beast enjoying its rampage. With only a thin stretch of wall to maneuver with and other soldiers behind them, her men could do little but stand and die.

"Hold," she repeated through gritted teeth.

And finally, crushing a young woman like a pulped grape, the beorn came close enough.

"Now," the Captain-General hissed.

Torches were put to the earthen jugs of pitch just before they were thrown, of the ten thrown nine splattering across the monster's large form. Flames burned clear and bright, spreading as they ate at dry dead flesh and the beorn howled.

"Halberds to the front," Catalina ordered, breathing a sigh of relief.

The halberdiers hurried forward, hacking at the creature even as it was destroyed by the flames and ensuring it would not smash into their formation. It toppled into the city below and the fantassins hurried to reinforce the bastion even as Catalina stayed behind long enough to arrange for the wounded to be sent back. Her bodyguards closed in around her as she followed into the bastion, finding the situation there had turned around. Captain Reinald had holed up his men in corners while the beorn rampaged but they'd come out swinging as soon as the beast was gone so the ghouls were already on the backfoot when her reinforcements arrived. She left the clearing out of the stragglers to her soldiers and took off her helmet, seeking out Captain Reinald.

She found the fat man conversing with his wizards, an untended wound on his arm that'd been inflicted through now-ripped mail. The captain of the Folies Rouges dismissed his casters when he saw her approach, offering a grateful nod.

"My thanks for drawing it away," Reinald said. "All our pitch was spent on the first three and we hadn't gotten fresh jugs yet."

"I expect you'll have to return the favour before this is over," Catalina replied. "Have you heard anything from further north?"

"The Bayeux footmen are holding strong," the older man replied. "Prince Arsene made it clear he'll tolerate no retreat."

Catalina breathed out a snort as Reinald smirked. Prince Arsene Odon did not have a particularly inspiring reputation as a military commander, though he wasn't as bad as some other royals. Still, he would never have made it above company-captain in the Ligera.

"We'll need to start bringing in the smaller companies to freshen up bloodied positions," Catalina said. "I don't want to dilute our ranks too much, but..."

"No, I quite agree," Captain Reinald said. "If we bleed our finest soldiers dry too soon there'll be nothing but the dregs left fighting come sunlight."

She nodded in agreement. It might seem callous to dismiss some of her fellow fantassin companies with so contemptuous a term, but some of them were honestly no better than levies. Which brought to mind yet more trouble.

"We'll need to keep a close eye on the Brabant conscripts," she sighed. "They keep breaking."

"Prince Etienne croaking it did a number on them," Reinald sympathetically said. "That man was his principality's backbone. Didn't help that the Iron Prince decided to pick them up by the throat afterwards."

"He did what he needed to," Catalina replied, but her tone was lukewarm.

That Klaus Papenheim was one of the finest generals alive was not in dispute – though the Arlesite in Catalina had her fancying that Rozala Malanza might give him a closer match than most – but that he'd acted like a... Lycaonese wasn't either. The northerners liked their tyrants, glorified them, but their southern cousins had never shared the fascination. Tyrants there got knives, not statues. Had this been another war, another man, many a company would have put coin together to hire assassins over a man who'd arrested so many officers on such spurious grounds. These were desperate times, of course, and the officers *had* been out of line. It was still a bitter pill to swallow for all of them, Catalina thought, that the Iron Prince's heavy-handed actions had not earned so much as a raised eyebrow from any other great name.

Mind you, whoever it was that'd figured appealing to the *Black Queen* over an issue of *military discipline* was a good idea should be sent to Keter for raising in the hopes that the stupid was infectious. Catalina liked the woman more than she figured she would have, being a murderous heretic, and considered her a generally reasonable superior officer. She was also someone who hanged her own soldiers when they got sticky fingers and whose answer to a mutiny was a lot more likely to be crucifixion than sympathy. It had to be the *Joyeux Chevaliers* that'd pushed for that, having some many noble brats within their ranks had them believing they were clever manipulators instead of expendable Highest Assembly catspaws.

"Sure he did," Captain Reinald grunted. "Let's hope he doesn't find it necessary to do it again."

"We wouldn't have so weak a position if we could agree on a representative," Catalina pressed. "I know the Grizzled Fantassin turned us down-"

She'd named an exorbitant price first, then noted that unless the Grand Alliance itself could be outbid there was no point in trying to buy her services. Old Teresa was said to be out in Mercantis these days, that floating pleasure house of a city. Hard terms to beat, admittedly.

"- it can't be you," Captain Reinald frankly said. "The Ligera has too many enemies, you'll never get the votes."

"It has to be *someone*, Reinald," she exasperatedly said. "If not me then another. And quickly. We are..."

Words failed her, for a moment, as the thought was hard to express. It was not a particular indignation that had been weighing on Catalina Ferreiro's mind but a hundred little signs, as if had some unknown prophecy on the tip of her tongue but could not bring herself to speak it.

"We're dying, Reinald," she quietly said. "Fantassins, our trade. You've seen the armies the rest of the world fields, now. Do you think we could handle the Second Army or a few sigils of drow? Gods, even the Levantines are making something of themselves."

We don't have mages and priests, Catalina thought. We don't have sappers or Chosen. War is leaving us behind. And the Principate had been hardened by the war too, she could feel it. See in faces and hear it in words. No one spoke of war as a part of the Ebb and Flow now, as the game of princes where glories and fortune were wagered. Even princes had grown harsher, and the wars they'd wage would grow harsher with them. Would veterans of the war against Keter really hesitate to torch a village? It had been against the unspoken laws of war in Procer, once, but what did those childish things matter to someone who'd spent three years fighting howling corpses as madness twisted the land around them? There would be no return to the old days, after this came to an end.

For better or worse.

"You're not wrong," Reinald muttered. "Some of the things I've heard... But this is a discussion to finish when the enemy is no longer at our gate, perhaps."

Catalina nodded, then smiled.

"Tarry not," she hummed.

The other mercenary snorted, recognizing the words from the old song everyone in their trade, from the greenest of boys to the most grizzled of warwives, had heard at least once.

"Or we'll be dead," Captain Reinald finished.

Over the edge of the rampart, a skeleton dragged itself halfway onto solid ground before a soldier smacked it down. The climbers were beginning to reach the top, she realized with dread.

The skirmishing was over at last, and the battle had begun in truth.

—

Well, Roland thought, this was going to be a problem.

"So *that's* why they kept dropping vultures and Revenants through the wards," the Headhunter said.

He – Roland had asked, as he couldn't discern the differences in her facepaint that heralded either gender – was looking at the same thing that he was: a gate into Arcadia opening in the middle of a city street. Which shouldn't be possible, the Rogue Sorcerer thought, considering this city was thick with wards. *But the dead had years to meddle with the city after taking it*, he reminded himself. The Grand Alliance reclaiming Hainaut and then repairing the old foundations as well as slapping on fresh wards was not a comprehensive fix, despite the frenzied efforts of their mages. At least it did not seem to be without costs for the Dead King: the gate had only opened by subsuming a Revenant and was opening rather slowly. They could not be opened with a snap of one's finger, which was good news tacked on to the bad.

"We need to close it," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "And find out any other gate that might have been opened out of sight."

"The city's bleeding magic everywhere, wizardling," the Headhunter skeptically replied. "We might as well look for a particular needle in a box full of them."

"Keter needs Revenants to make these," Roland replied, shaking his head. "There won't be many, and we'll have seen them falling."

"There could have been more than one Revenant by bird," the Headhunter shrugged. "And they can run anywhere after the fall. We've only caught one so far."

Fair points, but only so long as providence refused to put a finger on the scales. Roland would have to hope otherwise.

"There's another band out there roaming," he reminded the other. "We can only hope they will catch what we don't."

He rose from his crouch before the Headhunter could answer, expecting that otherwise he would be served a sermon on the subject of why the three young souls with transitory Named also assigned to keeping the streets clear were weak and so naturally doomed to failure. The other man's opinions were more strident than thoughtful, in Roland's opinion, but he saw nothing to be gained by arguing. The Headhunter's ways had paid off for him, and people with full pockets didn't usually tend to abandon the ways that'd filled them. A long casting rod of sculpted ivory in hand, the Rogue Sorcerers leapt off the edge of the roof and landed on the cobblestone street. The gate into Arcadia, a broad rectangle at least twelve feet high and twice that in length, was pulsing. *Still stabilizing*, Roland thought. He brushed a hand close to the surface, mustering his will.

"Confiscate," he murmured.

It took, he found with some relief, but not as much as he would have wanted it to. He was drawing from the active spell, but not the foundations. The light of the portal began flickering wildly. All he was achieving was further destabilizing the gate, not breaking it. Movement from the corner of his eye had him drawing back, but not quite close enough. A javelin, he saw just a heartbeat before it bit into his first defensive enchantment and shattered it. A shell of light became visible for a moment before shattering. A second flew out, but by then the Headhunter was there and he swatted them down with insolent ease.

"Gate's not closed, wizardling," the Headhunter grunted. "Get the Hells on with it."

I'm not sure I can, Roland thought. If he could not confiscate the sorcery, then he had to either overpower or shatter the gate – which would require strength he did not have or for his knowledge to be superior to that of the *Dead King*. He was going to have to improvise. If he couldn't break the gate itself, what were his options? He cast a glance at the Headhunter.

"You have the head of a Damned who could empower magic, correct?"

"Amplify," the Headhunter corrected. "And the heads only give weaker imitations. What are you scheming?"

"I want," the Rogue Sorcerer boyishly grinned, "to make this a much *larger* gate."

He felt like tapping his foot, like humming an old song. He was only a few mistakes away from dying, but wasn't that where he did all his best work?

—

Princess Beatrice Volignac of Hainaut went utterly still, her horse following suit.

Frost spread across the cobblestones like the breath of some wintry beast, steam curling above it like fading stripes of lace as ghostly lights set the shadows to dancing. It was as if a hole had been cut out in the world, revealing some fantastic winter vista hidden behind the curtains of Creation, and yet what had come out of it was not some strange monster or fair lord. It was an intimately familiar sight. The banner was what Beatrice recognize first, stirring as it was in the wind. A golden griffin on blue, crowned by three daffodils, but it was not the heraldry that made it distinct. It was the long haft of forever unrotting whitewood it hung from, ending in a crown of pure gold set with sapphires. Even streaked with ash and dust, Beatrice would have recognized the royal banner of the House of Volignac anywhere.

Riders streamed out of the pale plains of snow on the other side, ranks upon ranks of silent souls in beautiful enameled armour that rode steeds of the finest coats. Their lances were raised tall, a forest of sharp steel held up by unwavering hands, and at their head rode a beautiful woman. Skin pale as milk could be seen through the open visor of her helm, golden hair in a long braid going down her back. The armour she wore was a gift from Beatrice's father, a family heirloom of blue-painted steel etched with enchantments, and at her side the ornate wooden sheath of the ancient blade of House Volignac, Mordante, rested against her hip. And on her brow, atop her helm, a crown of gold had been inlaid into the steel for her name was Julienne Volignac and she had once rule Hainaut.

There was a gaping, bloody wound where her heart should be.

"Sister," Beatrice softly breathed out. "Gods, what did they do to you?"

She had taken a mere hundred riders with her as an escort when heading for the western rampart, a pittance compared to the thousands Julienne had taken with her on that last doomed charge to delay the dead long enough for their people to escape. *But only a few have crossed*, Beatrice thought. *We can hold them at the gate*. She looked around and found only fear on the faces of her soldiers. As much at the sight of who it was they were fighting as the numbers, the princess thought.

"Bastien," she said, raising her voice as she addressed the captain of her bodyguard. "Go for reinforcements. Hurry."

"Your Grace," the man replied, hesitating, "what is it you intend?"

Beatrice Volignac breathed out, watching her sister's golden hair across the street.

"I have you an order," she harshly said. "Go."

She heard him slink away, chastened. In the distance, Julienne Volignac met her sister's eyes and smiled sadly. She brought down her visor, lowered her lance.

"Look ahead," Princess Beatrice said, voice ringing out. "That is what Keter means to make of you."

The Princess of Hainaut lowered her lance, and after a terrifying heartbeat saw that her retinue followed suit.

"They gave their lives for everyone here," Beatrice said, throat clogged up. "So we could live, crawling through ash and dust to return home another day."

She pressed her knees against her mount, the destrier breaking into a trot. Her retinue followed. The enemy, on the other side, lowered their lances and began to advance.

"We're home now," Beatrice Volignac shouted. "We're home, and tonight *we lay our ghost to rest.*"

Her soldiers roared, the thunder of hooves crashing against cobblestones drowning out battlecries even as the two lines of horsemen rammed into each other.

—

Catalina was not sure who it was that began to sing.

The world had turned black and white, chopped into moments of violence and moments of relief, but through both songs had begun to wind their way. There was nothing, the Captain-General thought with an exhausted smile, that Procerans loved more than a song. Even the ever-cold Lycaonese thawed, when the time came to sing. There were more singers than birds in Procer, it had once been said, and for every season and hour there was a song. Or a poem, or a dance or another gesture of beauty returned to the Creation that had given birth to all of them. And wasn't that, in the end, the most beautiful thing about her home? Even in the dark, they sang.

Perhaps in the dark most of all.

The dead came over the rampart, silent and relentless. Catalina battered them over the edge, hacked and split and felt cold iron sink into her arm when tiredness slowed her, but the tide would not end so neither would she. And all around her, the Captain-General saw only bastards. Mud nobles and cutthroats, peasants and shopkeepers, the leftovers of a great realm with blades in hand. And still they held, her thousands of brothers and sisters who too bore the name of *fantassin*, her fellow fools who traded life and limb for coin and a few boasts. And so when the song poured out of her throat, she did not fight. What else was there to do, when the world was so ugly, but to bring a sliver of beauty in it?

"My father wept for a prince

And died with a spear in hand."

The man by her side, covered in sweat and filth, shot her an incredulous look and began laughing before cracking a skeleton's skull. He joined his voice to hers.

"My mother hasn't wept since

Or left a god un-damned."

It spread like a fire, snaking along the rampart and the bastion until a thousand throats sang it, that old bastard song, the *Sun In the West*.

—

Beatrice Volignac was in the heart of the whirlwind, dancing with many smiling deaths.

They fought desperately against the honoured dead, trading lances with corpses until all were spent and furious melee with sword and shield swept across the cobblestone. There was something burning in all their bellies tonight that had devoured whole the fear, replaced it with clenched teeth and hard eyes. Before them was the mockery Keter had made of the finest gesture any of them had known, and what could they do but quell it? Nothing less could be tolerated. So Beatrice traded blows with a corpse in armour, ramming her blade into the throat and throwing it down its undead mount before pushing forward. A blow glanced off her shield and she answered with a hard cut, but it found no purchase in the enemy's armour.

They were losing, the Princess of Hainaut knew. The charge had not been enough. They had slowed the enemy's outpouring through the gate but not cut it, and now they were being drowned. Yet she found, queerly, that the thought did not move her to fear. It would be a worthy death, Beatrice decided, and such a thing was not to be feared. She was a princess of the blood, a Volignac: what did she have to fear in this world or any other, save for dishonour? So when the song came on the wind, drifting like curl of smoke, the Princess of Hainaut laughed. She, too, had once dreamed of being the one who would once again bring the sun to west. A good song, she decided, to die singing.

"Maybe I'll go east, they say

Swords there can win a crown."

Voices joined hers, as the dead hemmed them in and the last of them gathered around the banner. The enemy were coming for them, for the killing stroke. Through her visor, Beatrice met her sister's eyes as Julienne approached with the ancient sword of their shared blood.

"Rule king a year and a day

Be buried with great renown."

—

Roland hummed under his breath, one hand on a desiccated human head and the other on a portal through which a great many people were trying to kill him.

It was just going to be one of those nights, he figured.

"Is it working?" the Headhunter asked with a grunt.

He carved through another skeleton's neck, kicking it into another's path as it tried to cross. The villain had, impressively enough, been holding the gate single-handedly all this time.

"Well," the Rogue Sorcerer mused, "if it is, then-"

There was a deafening keening noise and the gate double in height before beginning to shake.

"Wonderful," Roland grinned.

The Headhunter turned around, throwing an axe at him that cut through the javelin someone had very unkindly thrown at Roland's chest. Keterans, a people truly without manners.

"It's gotten bigger," the Headhunter noted, unimpressed. "Is that it? I thought it was-"

What looked like the maw of a beorn began to pass through the gate, roaring angrily and cutting off the conversation. Rudeness upon rudeness, truly. The other Named pulsed with a stolen aspect coming from a head and tried to force the construct back, but Roland kept pushing sorcery into the gate and amplifying the flow with the human head. Soon, soon it would be ready. Mind you, he'd best not tarry long. How did the song go again?

"Long ago, the tale goes,

The sun rose in the west

It might be it will again:

Tarry not, or we'll be dead."

The Headhunter was thrown back into the street, hitting the wall of a house and breaking through it, but Roland only smiled even as the beorn turned towards him.

—

Beatrice's horse had died on the third pass, but she'd knocked her sister down from hers so it had evened out the affair.

They had sparred on occasion, while they both lived, though in those days Beatrice had not taken the blade all that seriously — it had been the horse and lance she preferred, finding bladework to be an ungainly and sweaty affair. The spars had been measured, almost fond, more shared time than any genuine test of each other. *This* was nothing like it. Beatrice desperately brought up

her shield as the family sword, Mordante, bit at the painted steel and let out a flash of light and frost. She swung at Julianne's head, but her sister's shield was already in place and they collided with each other as each tried to make the other trip on the blood-strewn ground

"I will free you," Beatrice gasped through her helm. "Gods, Julianne, I swear. *I will not leave you like this.*"

The enchanted sword kissed the top of her helm, freezing the visor shut, but the Princess of Hainaut began hammering at her sister with her shield. Julianne had the strength of undeath to her, the tirelessness, but Beatrice was *fat*. She was heavy, and muscled, and when she struck her sister shook from the impact. Once, twice, thrice until Julianne slipped on blood and bone and Beatrice followed her down. A lance passed above her head, forced away by one of her last men at the last moment, but the Princess of Hainaut's eyes were only for her sister. Mordante bit into her side, frostburn creeping through her mail, but Beatrice ripped off her sister's helm and met those blue eyes with her own as she drew back.

"The fire turns to ember,

I wake from a sorry dream

Morning rides in pale splendour

Chasing down a fading gleam."

"We will meet again," Beatrice whispered, "in a better place."

And down her sword went.

—

Roland of Beaumaraais, nothing but a — borrowed — human head in hand, smiled at the monster forcing its way out of the gate into Arcadia.

"This should do the trick," he announced, removing his hand from the portal at last.

The magic he'd been drawing on stuttered, the bundle nearly empty, and the Rogue Sorcerer offered the beorn as deep a bow as he could without making the head dangle. The construct swatted at him, but he stepped away even as the Headhunter rose from rubble and the clawed limb came well short. The beorn seemed confused, as well it might be.

"The gate's frozen," the Rogue Sorcerer told it. "Brilliant man, Masego. His work his *comprehensive.*"

Roland hadn't even noticed when that derivation had been added to the ward schematics, but then that didn't matter. What did matter was that the Dead King was not the only brilliant Trismegistan sorcerer in these parts, which meant that what had been used here to make the gates was a technicality and not a flaw. The last of the magic he'd fed the portal was absorbed at last, and with a loud keening the portal's length began to extend. It managed to grow another five feet, before the blind spot in the wards laid down by the Hierophant was entirely outgrown and they triggered with a vengeance.

"To borrow from a friend," Roland smiled, then raised his hand and snapped his fingers.

The portal exploded in a pillar of power and light, the city wards crushing it into nonexistence without mercy, and Roland de Beaumaraais was once more left to wonder at just how much he loved magic. There was always something new, wasn't there? The Headhunter caught up, looking at him warily.

"Come on," the Rogue Sorcerer idly said. "There will be other portals."

And, hands in pockets, he began to make his way down the street as he sang the song that'd been on his mind all evening.

"The road is long and winding,

Though I did it love it once

And tread it still, searching

The bottom of many cups."

Sometimes, even charlatans got to have a good turn.

—

Gods, but they were holding.

The Captain-General watched as ladders were brought to the walls and undead scaled the cliffs. Stones and logs were thrown at them, burning oil poured on ladders and Light filled the air as priests began turning the wrath of Above on the dead. It was a narrow, wavering thing but they were holding. And now the reinforcements were pouring in, lesser companies freshening the ranks of the greater and bringing with them well-rested hands. Mages were beginning to rotate in, cadres trained in the Arsenal, and though their magics were simple when turned on a single great monster in concert they were also often successful. Catalina withdrew from the rampart, exhausted enough her vision swam, but after a tonic and rest she would return.

She sat by a fire, her bodyguards close around her, and drank deeply from a waterskin. She smiled as she heard the chorus of the song rise again, perhaps the tenth time it had been sung tonight. The Sun In the West was often sung as wistful or angry – there was a reason it was familiar to taverns but rare in courts – but tonight it was, instead, almost defiant.

“Long ago, the tale goes,

The sun rose in the west

It might be it will again:

Tarry not, or we’ll be dead.”

Our sun has faded, Catalina thought, but it has not yet set.

There was still blood in the veins of the lumbering beast known as the Principate, and perhaps after the war... Lightning struck at the bastion and a howling gale swept over it, hundreds dying in the blink of an eye as Catalina was thrown against a wall and bit her lip as she felt her collarbone break. The storm screamed, and two silhouettes landed on the stone.

The Scourges had arrived.

Interlude: Woeful

“Hardship does not create valour any more than rivers create fish. It is simply a circumstance where the valorous reveal themselves, and it would be a mistake to believe that what misery or ruin unveil could not also be brought into the light by love or duty.”

– King Albert Fairfax of Callow, the Thrice-Invaded

Guillaume screamed in terror as he scraped desperately at the floor, trying to keep the winds from snatching him up in their like they had Leonie. His fingers were raw and bloody, the cut on his face was aching something fierce, he’d dropped his sword and Heavens it just wasn’t going to be *enough*. He could feel the wind pulling at his feet, as if trying to drag him into the sky. The gales were thick with ash and dust, hard to peer through, but Guillaume had seen his friends go up into the whirlwind and never seen any of them return. It would be death if he went up. So he kept crawling forward as the cacophony of wind blotted out the rest of the world, like a fish fighting the current, but he was feeling a tug on his legs as the strength of the storm grew and – and, somehow, his hands had reached into a bubble of calm.

He did not waste time questioning the miracle, only dragging himself forward along the floor with the last of his strength as he panted and grunted and half-wept in relief. A hand grabbed him

by the collar and he started in surprise, but he did not resist after realizing he was being dragged further into the bubble. There was not a trace of the winds here, he realized, and even the screams of the storm were muted. Guillaume looked up, his face covered in cold sweat and his arms still trembling, following the sight of a bracer-clad arm over a black gambeson up to a steel cuirass and then something that was impossible to mistake: a great black cloak with a patchwork of many colours stitched on, banners and stranger things.

The Mantle of Woe, he'd heard Callowans call it. And so it was the Black Queen's brown eyes considering him, set in a hard and angular face that seemed like it had been shaped to keep a frown. Guillaume shivered. They said the Queen of Callow was kind to the commons, but she was still one of the Damned and who would tell if she decided to take his soul now?

"Your Majesty," he stammered, "I-"

Idly she flicked a finger at his forehead, the lights dimming around them, and Guillaume felt something cold slither through his veins and all the way up his face. Like a coiled snake, it waited under his cheek near his wound.

"That'll stop the bleeding," the Black Queen said, in slightly accented Chantant. "But you'll still need to get it healed or it'll infect."

Guillaume dragged himself up halfway to sitting, gingerly touching the edges of the deep cut on his cheek and finding that it no longer bled or stung. There was a cool, pleasant numbness instead when he prodded. Thanks stumbled out of his mouth and she offered half a nod before rising from her crouch, leaning heavily on a long staff of dead wood that gave off a sense of... solidity that one did not often find in dead things. The queen suddenly cocked her head to the side, as if she'd heard something he had not. He pricked his ear even as he pushed himself further away from the edge of the bubble, but he heard nothing aside from the distant screaming of the winds.

"Good, the Drake was overdue," the Black Queen said, speaking to thin air. "And Ishaq said they got the Hawk as well?"

There was a silence, then the queen grimaced.

"I don't care what the Artificer says, Hakram," she said. "Even if the Hashamallim themselves came down from the Heavens and personally pissed that Light, unless we see that body burn with our own eyes then the Hawk isn't dead. Pass the word to keep an eye out for her."

Merciful Heavens, Guillaume shivered. Were they all doomed, had the Black Queen had gone mad and now spoke to the wind? Or had

her powers grown so fearful that she could speak to others who were far away? He was not sure which thought scared him more.

"Your Majesty," he tried. "I do not-"

Dark eyes turned to him.

"Be silent for a bit," the Black Queen said. "No, not you. There's this-"

She cocked an eyebrow.

"What's your name?"

"Guillaume," he slowly said.

She cast a glance at his equipment, the worried gambeson and dull cuirass that looked so shoddy compared to her own.

"Brabantine?" she guessed.

"I am," he said.

"A conscript named Guillaume stumbled into my stillness bubble," she told the air. "But never mind that. Does Archer have eyes on them?"

After a moment, she blinked in surprise.

"The Archmage came up himself?" she said. "Shit. They're going for a major breach, then, he wouldn't come personally unless he expected to have room to cast in. Who's the other one?"

Guillaume had, without even noticing it, lowered his guard. He must have, or else why would he feel his entire body clenching at the sight before him? The easy expression on the Black Queen's face went up in smoke, revealing a face that was all hard iron. Starlight dimmed around them, as if shying away in fear.

"Meant for Ishaq's band to get him, but we'll do," the Queen of Callow evenly said. "'Drani knows?"

A heartbeat, then she nodded.

"Good," the Black Queen said. "She can take the vanguard."

—

"Sahelian confirmed it," Hakram's voice spoke into her ear. *"It's the Pale Knight with the Archmage. Catherine leaves the vanguard to you."*

Indrani hadn't needed Flighty Phantom's say-so to be sure of what it was she was looking at, but Cat letting her start off the

waltz was good news. So long as that damned storm was swirling about, she couldn't do much with her bow anyway. After the first and only time she'd been able to put an arrow in the Archmage by Seeing a weak point in the winds, the Revenant had rebuilt his usual storm defence from the ground up so there would be no repeat. The most irritating part seemed that the Archmage was now seemingly able to bring other Revenants into its storm to protect them, which he hadn't been able to a few months back. The defences had improved again.

She was going to have to carve an opening with her swordarm.

"Got it," Indrani quietly replied, letting the paired stone carry her words.

She unstrung her bow, as it'd make for too easy a target otherwise, and slid it against her back in the leather sheath she'd made. Crouched atop the bastion to the north of the one that'd fallen to the assault of the Scourges, Archer studied the grounds she was going to have to assault once last time. The ramparts of Hainaut had fewer bastions than most walls, though she wasn't Cat or Hakram so she had no real idea why, but the way they were made was pretty straightforward. Two levels: the lower one accessible from the rampart themselves through gates on each side and the upper one accessible through stairs leading up from inside. Easy grounds to defend.

Trouble was that the dead had come from above, directly on the flat grounds of the upper level, so it was them that were defending. Might still be some soldiers huddled up below, since the Revenants seemed more interested in allowing iron ladders to land on the wall than pushing their advantage, but they wouldn't last long once the dead got to clearing them out. Indrani wasn't worried about the skeletons coming up the ladders, but she didn't like the look of that storm: not only was it spreading out from the bastion on which it was centered, the winds seemed to be getting stronger. If she tried to walk her way to the lower bastion, she risked getting caught up in that.

She narrowed her eyes, trying out a **Stride** along the path. The feeling wasn't as clear as when she used the aspect when journeying, but it still tended to give a hint – and this time, the sensation was that of a broken path. Yeah, like she'd thought those winds were going to be a headache. Fortunately, just because she had to go on foot didn't mean she had to take *this* particular. Between **See** and **Stride**, finding the thin places between Creation and the Ways had always been staggeringly easy to her and tonight was no exception: a little below her perch, two feet forward and five feet off the ground, there was a weakness. Someone must have used powerful magic there earlier, it had that kind of a taste.

Would it get her where she needed to go? Indrani listened to the pulse of her aspects carefully, then nodded in satisfaction. Close enough.

"Going," Archer told Hakram through the stones. "I'm using the Ways, and tell them to be careful with those winds. I think the storm is growing."

She did not wait for an answer before leaping down, tumbling through the thin veil on the Pattern even as she reached for her longknives. The Pale Knight was at hand, finally.

Time to teach the Scourge that killing Lysander had been a very fatal mistake.

—

The connection severed itself before he could sever it, which Adjutant took to mean Archer had entered the Twilight Ways.

It wouldn't be long before she popped out in the middle of the enemy then, as had been her wont since she'd learned she had a knack for 'sidling'. Unlike using gates it wouldn't forewarn the Revenants, another reason that Indrani was best suited among them to taking the vanguard. Even if he'd still had both his legs, he wouldn't have been able to... Hakram forced himself to concentrate on the here and now. Too often these days did his thoughts take him down fruitless paths. Fingers pressing on another stone, the orc linked to Catherine.

"Indrani is moving, using the Ways," he told her. "You need to prepare."

"I hear you," she replied. *"Is Masego ready as well?"*

That was the essence of their striking plan, after all. Indrani was to interrupt the Archmage's casting of the storm, freeing Catherine and Masego to hammer both Scourges immediately with strong workings. From there the plan grew... fluid, as things grew harder to anticipate, but there were ideas that'd been discussed.

"All he needs is my signal," Hakram replied.

"Then let's get this going," Catherine replied, severing the link.

From her tone, the orc decided, she'd be smiling. He found he was as well. Grim as the circumstances were, it had been too long since the Woe had fought as one. That Vivienne's skulking would be replaced by Akua Sahelian's was not an improvement to his eyes, but these days Vivienne had duties of her own and – and it seemed that Sahelian wanted to speak. He touched the

corresponding tone, and immediately her smooth speaking voice resonated in his ear.

"I have eyes on the undead climbing the ladders," the shade said. "Most are unarmoured, not shock troops, and they appear to be bringing up barrels. Should I risk a closer look?"

In most battles, it was Catherine that would have made such a call. Weighed the risks and benefits, then send out another to see her will through. Tonight, though, the burden fell on him. With the Woe being split among so many places, there could be no easy coordination save through the artefact Hierophant had crafted for that very purpose. That also meant that the one handling the artefact would make decision that would, typically, belong to the leader of their band. Hakram had been unsure of his own feelings, when Catherine had pressed the duty onto him. On one hand, it was a mark of great trust on her part. On the other, it seemed like an assignment perfectly tailored to keep him away from the fighting.

"Do it," Adjutant gravelled. "Archer's going in, we need no surprises."

"As you say," Sahelian replied.

It had been the delayed realization that someone would have to take up this task even if he refused it that settled the matter for him, in truth. And that anybody but him would either understand the Woe less, be distrusted by Catherine to see this done properly or be Vivienne Dartwick, who was needed to keep an eye on the Army of Callow in their stead. That the work existed beyond him, that it was not simply made to tuck him aside safely, had soothed the ugly assumptions that had been lurking in the back of his mind. He was shaken out of his thoughts by footsteps, one of his goblin attendants scuttling up the ladder leading up to the belfry overlooking the western rampart where he'd set up.

"Word from the streets," Lieutenant Tweaker called out, popping her head over the edge. "All invading gates are closed but two, and Beatrice Volignac is wounded but alive."

Hakram nodded.

"Time estimate for the last two?" he asked.

"The Rogue Sorcerer is headed for the first one, so not long," the goblin replied. "The other is still disgorging soldiers, though, so only when the Levantines get to-"

The head popped away and there was some chatter further down before it popped back up.

"The Peregrine took care of it," Lieutenant Tweaker corrected. "Only the Sorcerer's left now, a half hour at most."

"Keep me informed," Adjutant simply replied.

"That's the aim, sir," the goblin grinned.

He snorted, eyes returning to the rampart where a storm still raged, but the calm was not to last.

"Ah," Akua Sahelian suddenly breathed into his ear. *"There appears to be something of a complication, Adjutant."*

"Define complication," Hakram warily said.

"I have obtained one of the barrels in question," the shade said, "and just opened it. While I've no alchemical kit at hand, I do believe this is highly concentrated poison gas."

It fell into place a moment later. The storm growing, how the Scourges had been remarkably defensive in stance after their initial overwhelming strike. The Archmage had not begun to unleash offensive magics because he was about to turn his storm into one, by making the winds poisonous.

"Can you delay this?" Hakram asked.

The fingers of his dead hand, one of two, drummed against the end of the arm of his wheelchair – a small sculpted skull that Masego had been kind enough to add at his request.

"Unlikely," Akua Sahelian replied. "My acquisition of the barrel did not go unremarked, and I am now pursued by an entire flock of _"

There was a loud screech on the other side, followed by some very unflattering comments about vultures and baldness in Mthethwa that he suspected the shade had not actually meant for him to hear. Either way, it was now clear who the information needed to be passed on to.

Hakram's fingers found the stone and the dance began anew.

—

Guillaume would, in the safety of his own mind, admit to being curious as to why the Black Queen was just standing there and waiting. He wasn't fool enough to ask, though, or to look in the mouth the horse that was her continued presence here warding danger away. Guillaume had been born in a proper town, been taught some letters by the House of Light, so he wasn't some countryside yokel. Most of the stories about the Black Queen had to be guff. Tales swapped around camp fires, getting bigger with time or just invented wholesale – for some reason, some of the

easterners kept insisting the queen had castrated an ogre in single combat. There had to be some truth to them, though, and Gods knew there weren't a lot of monsters out there that the Queen of Callow wouldn't make think twice.

That was reassuring, in a grim sort of way, which had Guillaume wondering if he had not ferreted out the quintessence of what it meant to be Callowan.

"You'll need to run when we lift the storm."

Jolted out of his philosophical musings, Guillaume started and turned to look at the Damned that'd addressed him. The queen looked tense, face set in that frown again, but not otherwise particularly concerned. It was kind of soothing, to have someone around looking at the end times like they were some sort of irritating inconvenience instead of the end of the world.

"You don't need to tell me twice," Guillaume feelingly said, then bit his lip. "I didn't ask, Your Majesty, but my company..."

"If they were on the rampart, they're dead," the Black Queen replied, not unkindly, suddenly then raised a finger to silence him. "I'm listening."

There was a long pause.

"And Akua thinks the winds will carry it?" the queen quietly asked.

Guillaume blinked in confusion. He'd never heard of anyone of that name, though he then reminded himself it was exceedingly unwise to eavesdrop too hard here. Boys from proper little towns like him weren't meant to hear royal conversations.

"We'll only get one clear shot at the two of them," the Black Queen reluctantly said. "What's the risk it could spread into the city?"

A grimace ensued.

"Archer should be able to burn out a single breath's worth," the queen muttered. "And she's got the scarf to filter, afterwards. Shit. How many survivors left from that first strike, do you think?"

Even as she leaned against her staff, the Black Queen – *Merciful Heavens*, Guillaume thought as he realized with a start that he was probably taller than her – worried her lip. One of her hands was twitching, he noticed, fingers curling into claws as they clenched against her palm and then slowly unclenched. Brown eyes swept across the winds, and then moved to him. He looked away hurriedly, and three long breaths passed.

"Fuck it," the Black Queen sighed. "We'll improvise. I'm going in, let Hierophant know."

Somehow dimly relieved, Guillaume risked a glance at the villainess. She offered her him a wild smile, for a heartbeat turning that dour tanned face into one that had him blushing.

"Hang on tight, Guillaume of Brabant," she said. "This is going to get *rough*."

—

"Why even bother making a plan, if she was going to discard it?" Masego complained.

"*We hadn't accounted for the gas,*" Hakram replied. "*If it gets into the city, this battle's over.*"

"As our defeat," Hierophant hazarded.

It seemed a reasonable guess, considering.

"Yes, Masego, as our defeat," Hakram amiably agreed. "*Catherine's striking, are you-*"

The connection between the two paired stones fizzled for a moment, dimming the last of his words as in the distance Hierophant's glass eyes glimpsed Night rising up in a great tide of darkness. Catherine was putting her back into it, if the reverberations from her working affected even active spellcraft in the area. An interesting phenomenon, and he itched to have a closer look at that in more contained conditions where the extraneous factors could be filtered out, but alas it would have to wait. Glints of a faded summer sun lighting up every dark, Masego studied his friend's attack curiously. It seemed a brutish thing, at first glance, a mere tide of shadow slammed into the Tumult's storm.

That the Scourge immediately answered with light magics, cutting beams of glowing power that tore into the darkness, was yet another reason why the Revenant was utterly underserving of being called an *archmage*. The effrontery was galling, truly. Someone with proper master of the higher mysteries would have noticed that Catherine, ever clever behind her pretence of thuggishness, hadn't just gathered Night and tossed it at an enemy working. The light cut through so easily not only because of its properties as one of the classical elements but also because that wave of Night was *meant* to be broken. It shook the storm some, when impacting it, but when the winds unmade it the darkness allowed itself to be carried by the gales like smoke.

Within thirty heartbeats, the entire storm was filled with a thick haze of Night. Masego felt a sliver of pride had how well

she'd learned the foundational principles of Trismegistan sorcery: the essence of magic was, after all, usurpation. Akua Sahelian was to be commended.

"-are you ready?"

"I am," Hierophant replied. "You may tend to the others. My attack is at hand."

Surrounded by three dozen barrels of bronze rods positively dripping with invested sorcery, Masego had not held back in Wrestling what he required for a fitting admonishment. The magic was thick and pure, its tint strangely similar to that of a thin layer of oil atop water, and it was slowly circling around him according to his will. In the distance, his eyes piercing through the veil of Night surrounding Catherine, he found her silhouette raising her staff into the air. Good, she was about done then. The moment it struck down, to Masego's unspoken glee, the Night spread out within the storm roiled for one moment as the Tumult had his own spell stolen away from his control. Just long enough for Catherine Foundling to disperse it, abruptly breaking the storm into fading wisps of wind.

"And now my turn," Masego murmured, robes stirring in the evening wind.

Like a streak of lightning the sorcery shot forward through the sky. Hierophant's concentration stumbled when he saw Indrani walk out of thin air – she must have sidled through the Ways – behind the Tumult, who did not notice. The Pale Knight did, however, and before a heartbeat had passed the Scourge had his great axe in hand and was moving towards her as he shouted a warning.

"Too slow," Hierophant spoke through clenched teeth.

The filaments of magic snaked forward, sliding between them, and with a curt gesture of the wrist Masego shaped the sorcery into one of the first formulas he'd ever learned: out of the end of the filament a textbook prefect magic missile erupted, splashing harmless against the Revenant's armoured helm but blinding it for a moment. Archer ducked under the burning flame unleashed by the Tumult before he even turned completely, circling to stay behind his back, even as Hierophant began shaping the sorcery again. That missile had cost him, he estimated, one part out of a thousand.

Time to see what he might achieve with some halfway decent spellwork instead.

—

Of course Cat had gotten it into her head that was Indrani *clearly needed* was for her cover to be snuffed out just before

she came out of the Twilight Ways. You know, just so she could be extra visible for the fucking Pale Knight and all. Gods, what a wench. Archer caught the axe between the edge of two knives, struggling against the Scourge for a moment before hastily stepping back when it became clear she wasn't going to win on strength alone. The bastard was even stronger than she'd come to believe from their first tangle at Lauzon's Hollow.

"This was unwise," the Pale Knight said.

"So was that second bottle of red last night, but that's life for you," Indrani agreeably replied.

He might have continued the conversation, but instead a streak of colourful magic darted in behind his head and seven wisps of hellflame shot out. The Revenant batted at them with the side of his axe, smothering a few, but more snuck around and slithered into the gap of his armour where they burst. With the Pale Knight distracted, Indrani went back on the offensive and moved to put him between her and the Archmage – which wasn't enough, damn it, the seventeen arrows of silver light that shot out from the top of the Scourge's staff curved around his ally. Shit, she was going to have to- and a gate into Twilight shivered to life right in their way, swallowing them all up. Archer grinned. Good, Cat was finally back in the fight.

She stepped around the gate, ducking under a swing of the Pale Knight's axe and darting forward. The undead in his pale plate tried to knee her at the junction of the shoulder and neck but Indrani tumbled forward and under him. Her longknives cut at the back of the knees as she rose, where most armours had a weakness, but she found no purchase as her blades scratched only steel. That they scratched at all was an improvement on her previous record against the armour, so- ah, she'd been right. There had been a weak point in the armour dead, it was just that the Revenant had had melted steel poured into the back of his knee. Still a weakness with the right tool, then.

And one more strike for Cat's theory that the Pale Knight's strange immunity was related specifically to his armour.

Archer kept moving forward, letting her enemy's backswing pass less than an inch behind her quiver, and got to the Archmage's flank. The Revenant was struggled with Zeze's latest bout of cleverness, a pool of raw magic he'd Wrested and was using to pump out spells from a distance by giving shape to parts of the pool – at the moment it was shooting out small tendrils of darkness that Indrani's Name screamed at her to avoid, so probably some kind of nasty Wasteland curse. The Archmage was frontloading a shield to deal with it, a pane of transparent light, and while its attention was there... ah, not so much of a sucker. Her attempt to sneak a blade into its back was met by a

rippling circle of space that almost blew the longknife out of her hand.

And now the Pale Knight was on her again, only for a gate to open in front of him. Indrani went around, putting the gate between herself and the Archmage, which allowed her to see Catherine come out with a bare sword and sock the bastard in the side of the head with her pommel.

"Took you long enough," Archer said.

Cat snorted, the two of them eyeing the Pale Knight as he steadied his footing and the gate closed behind them.

"Took the scenic route," Catherine Foundling idly said. "It's such a nice night out."

And behind them there was a scream as the wind began spinning above the Archmage, who never did like fighting without a storm to cover his –

–

Hierophant cocked an eyebrow. Did the Tumult take him for an utter fool? Certainly he could not **Wrest** to separate entities at the same time, but what kind of a second-rate conjurer would he be if he'd not accounted for such a weakness in his chosen strategy? He set the magic he'd gathered to spinning around itself, slowly feeding a spell that made it rotate as a globe to insignificant costs, and dug into his aspect with relish as he reached for the dawning storm and-

–

A column of condensed lightning struck the Archmage three times, and Indrani's heart skipped a beat. It simply could not be denied she had good – nay, exquisite – taste in men. The Pale Knight suddenly went stiff, turning towards, Catherine and in a strange voice spoke a single word to her in a language that Archer did not recognize.

Catherine went still.

–

"I can't stop them any longer," Akua Sahelian said. "They have enough casters concentrating on me that should I linger capture is certain."

Hakram grimaced. The shade had done well at keeping anyone from climbing the ladders and joining the melee atop the bastion, but it'd only been a matter of time until Keter put together a force capable of dealing with her. He'd honestly not expected her to last so long. Much as he disliked the woman, Adjutant would still

acknowledge the skillful performance she had offered tonight given her... reduced capabilities.

"Retreat," Adjutant gravelled. "Are Revenant coming up?"

"At least two, neither Scourges," Sahelian replied.

"I'll pass it along," Hakram said. "You know what to do."

She did not acknowledge his words, only severing the connection, a sure sign she was being attacked by enemies but trying not to show it too obviously. Hearing someone come up the ladder, Adjutant turned to see Lieutenant Tweaker's head pop over the edge.

"Movement at the front gate," she told him. "At least three wyrms seen, and it's looking like an all-out assault."

Hakram, idly, touched his prosthetic. A beautiful piece of work by Masego, that. He laid a finger against a groove in the wood, as if to scratch at a phantom itch.

"Sir," Lieutenant Tweaker began, "should we-"

Skeletal fingers closing against the length of wood, Hakram whipped out the wand and pressed his thumb against the rune sculpted into the side. There was a ripple of kinetic force as the enchantment was unleashed, the lieutenant's shape fading and turning into a misshapen Revenant halfway into a leap at him. Adjutant dropped the wand, hand finding the skull on the arm of his wheelchair and drawing out the axe it was the pommel of. He rose with the movement, Name pulsing with joy, and the blade split the skull in half as the undead's iron claws failed to pierce his chain mail. The Revenant dropped to the ground twitching as the necromancy tried to assert control of the limbs again. Half his body felt aflame, but he steeled himself through the pain.

"You got a goblin's speed right," Adjutant clinically assessed, "but not the weight. Sloppy."

The axe went up, the Revenant's eyes going wide, and Hakram of the Howling Wolves bared his fangs.

"Next time, Dead King? Send a Scourge."

The axe went down.

—

It was the aptness of the counters that allowed Hierophant to understand what he had been dealing with all this time. It was obvious, in retrospect.

The Tumult had answered the Liessen Chisel with a perfect shield in the Pelagian school, hellflame with a Stygian dry dousing developed during Maleficent the Second's wars against the League, used Jaquinite uncertainty principles to disrupt the magic he'd wrested halfway through a spell. The uninitiated among the heroes had insisted on calling the Revenant the 'Archmage' because of its broad variety of masteries in magic, but they'd never noticed that the masteries were *impossibly* broad. The only individual Masego had ever seen use so many different magics was the Rogue Sorcerer, and if he had never met Roland he might have dismissed this interpretation as him misreading the enemy's spellcraft. His eyes opened at the possibility, though, it was impossible to miss the telltale marks. This should not, however, be possible. Roland used a great variety of principles, but he had the protection of an aspect and though knowledgeable he was not a *master*.

The Tumult, however distasteful an entity, was.

Which was absurd, because those masteries could not have been acquired after death: the dictate that undead could not learn was not as absolute as some seemed to believe, but understanding the mysteries of an entirely new school of magic definitely qualified. And it was highly unlikely to have been achieved by living, as Hierophant was rather skeptical that someone capable of mastering multiple schools of magic, whether it drove them made or not, would not have made it into the pages of history. Which meant he was missing something. On a hunch, he tried a repeat: sending both a Liessen Chisel and a spurt of hellflame at the enemy from opposite ends of the massed sorcery. And he got his answer, at last.

The Tumult did parry both, but when it did it used Pelagian shields for both instead of the apter answer he had shown himself capable of using. Moreover, the Tumult had already shown he could cast two spells simultaneously so there was no reason for it not too. Unless it could not. *He can only use one school of magic at a time*, Masego deduced. And there was an obvious explanation as to why. He reached for his paired stone.

"Hakram," Hierophant said. "I have a theory about the Tumult."

"*I'm listening*," Adjutant replied.

He sounded a little out of breath, strangely enough.

"It is not a single Revenant," Masego said. "It is a multitude of dead spellcaster souls stitched onto the same corpse, likely with an oversoul – perhaps the body's original one – handling matters of control."

There was a moment of silence.

"*If we target that oversoul?*" Hakram asked.

"The King of Death is a skillful necromancer," Hierophant reluctantly replied. "It will not destroy the Revenant. It should, however, make it highly erratic as different souls struggle for control."

The orc chuckled.

"Well, let's see what we can do about that."

—

They'd taken too long to put down the Scourges, so now it was all going south. Indrani backpedalled, letting the axe pass half an inch away from her chin as behind her a blue-tinted shield took the impact from the four black streaks of sorcery that'd been aimed at her back. She flicked a feint at the Pale Knight's face that the Revenant didn't even bother to parry, ending up touching his helm, but the shaft of his axe was smashed into her elbow and she was forced to abort her actual blow and scuttle away as she swallowed a scream. Fuck, was it broken or just sprained? Either way, it strung like a bitch. She spared a glance for Cat, who'd just set a Revenant aflame and blown a few skeletons off the bastion but had just been forced to coat herself in a bubble of Night as a pack of undead mages tossed fireballs at her.

Indrani's straying eyes were not, to her surprise, rewarded by the Pale Knight pursuing. Instead the Revenant was going for... shit, barrels? As in those things full of poison Hakram had mentioned? One, two, three, strokes and three were split open as grey fog came billowing out. She hastily pulled up her scarf, trusting the enchanted weave to filter to toxins, which was long enough for the Archmage to attempt birthing another storm and Masego to shut him down. Unfortunately, the figure in grey and purple robes seemed indifferent to the lightning that was cast down on it. It flickered down the robes, grounding itself into the stone floor, and the Archmage began casting again. *Keeping Hierophant tied up*, Archer decided.

On the bright side, Indrani had just been given a moment to breathe so she reached for the pouch at her side and carefully unfolded the green cloth folded within before sliding it down the length of both her blades and tossing it to the side. It left them coated in a heavy transparent film, as she'd been told it would. Breathing deep, she went for the fog even as Cat wove some kind of bubble of darkness to suck it out and keep it from spreading too far. As she'd expected, the Pale Knight came out of the smoke aiming at Catherine's flank. Indrani sped forward, leaning into **Stride** to quicken her steps, and had to leap when just before she got into range the Revenant turned and swung at her. Catherine hammered at the Pale Knight's knee to hinder him, but a lesser Revenant was going after her again with a spear so...

Flow, Indrani thought, letting the aspect fill her up.

The axeblade went up, but she slapped it aside with a longknife and spun on herself. She landed on the Pale Knight's shoulder, tempted to attack but knowing that if she ended movement the aspect would end with it. She slid down the Revenant's back at is tried to catch her foot, landing behind it in a crouch and smoothly stabbing into the back of both knees. She found only a little bite, but it would be enough. The Pale Knight turned and struck at the same time, sweeping along the ground but she rolled between his legs and emerged in front of him. His extended arm was an opening, and she swiped the flat of a blade against the armoured elbow. The kick caught her in the ribs and one broke, but it was with a smile of triumph that she rolled against the ground and drew herself into a crouch.

The Pale Knight froze for a moment, before dropping his axe and pawing at his elbow as her aspect flickered out.

"Bad choice," Archer said. "The doses on the knees have had longer to spread."

Idly, she reached in the pouch and picked out a white cloth she used to wipe her blades clean with.

"What did you *do*?" the Pale Knight asked.

He stumbled, finding his footing hard to maintain.

"Delivered to you with the Concocter's regards," Indrani coldly said. "An alchemical acid that devour only bone and steel, repelled by all other substances."

The Pale Knight collapse to the ground, the only think keeping his upper legs connected to his thighs the stretch of pale plate covering them.

It was, Indrani thought with a hard smile, just the start.

—

Hierophant Wrested control of the storm again, jaw clenched, and shattered the spell.

How very irritating. Having grasped that he was facing a superior practitioner, the Tumult no longer even tried to do more than toss the occasional spell the way of Catherine and Indrani: instead he now repeatedly spent his power trying to birth another storm, not in hope of success but because doing so would command Masego's attentions. Hierophant himself rarely had long enough to do more than to form the occasional second-rate spell and send it flying before he must focus his attentions on the spell again, and the repeated struggle of wills against the Revenant was starting to tire him. Unlike the magic taken from inert objects, the Scourge's own must be forcefully usurped.

Masego felt sweat beading his forehead and going down his back. No, this stalemate was not to his advantage or that of his companions. The Tumult indicated the rhythm of their clashes, which meant he had an easier time sending spells at Catherine and Indrani than Hierophant had of defending them. The last three times it'd begun using increasingly obscure curses, and for the last Masego would admit that he'd been largely guessing when he'd used Sisi's Sphere as a defence – he'd not been certain it would actually work. He must regain the momentum, and that meant one thing: when the storm next began to form, Hierophant let it.

Instead he gathered all the sorcery he had left in a spinning globe, shaping it in one great working.

"Seven pillars hold up the sky," he began.

The world shuddered, seven wooden pillars forming out of raw magic around the Tumult. The Revenant tried to abandon the spell hastily, but Masego smiled. *It is too large*, he thought. *And it takes you a moment to change between schools*. Four runes formed above the Revenant's head, linked by a circle of pale light.

"Four cardinals, one meridian," he continued. "The wheel unbroken, spokes that are not. Thou shall not leave the circle."

And *that*, Hierophant decided, was a stalemate he could live with.

—

"Funny thing," Catherine Foundling said. "It was actually the Mirror Knight that helped me figure out how to kill you."

The Mantle of Woe fluttering around her Cat – no, in that moment Indrani could only think of her as the *Black Queen* – parried the last lesser Revenant's spear blow and severed its head with a brutal riposte, ripping out the blade and kicking the body over the edge of the bastion and onto a skeleton trying to climb up. The Pale Knight tried to push itself up with its axe, but Indrani kicked it away. The Revenant fell to his knees. She stepped away, sheathing her blades and reaching for her quiver.

"It's the Named you avoided in Cleves," the Black Queen idly continued. "The Red Knight and the Myrmidon. The Red Knight I understand – Devour is a headache and a half to deal with, but the *Myrmidon*? I couldn't figure out why."

The Pale Knight brought out another axe but Indrani had an Unraveller in hand – a great javelin artefact, one she'd adjusted so it could be fired from her bow but still very much a javelin. A swipe had that axe clattering away again and Archer added a smack against the helm so he would fall down on his back.

"But then I remembered that I never struck at you without adding Night to the blow," Catherine added, Night gathering to her like rivers to the sea. "And it fell into place. It's strength you have trouble with. Of that front, aside from the Mirror Knight who's damned slow those two are the physically strongest Named."

It was kind of hot, Indrani admitted to herself, when she monologued. She got that gleam in her eye, like she... well, maybe after this if they could spare the time. Probably counted as a form of healing, if you squinted a bit. Night caught her by the shoulders and tendrils began hoist her up into the sky. Higher and higher and higher, until the Pale Knight was barely more than a silhouette trying to get up, and then the darkness seized her tight.

"And down we go," Archer manically grinned.

She angled the unraveller downwards and the tendrils of Night drew back a bit before *throwing* her down. Eyes wide open, silent as she went down, she watched as the Pale Knight hacked away at the tendrils of shadow tripping him and slowly began to rise just in time to look up and see her. She met his eyes a heartbeat before the impact, too late for him to swing at her, and she slammed the unraveller through his throat through the gorget of pale steel. The Scourge gasped and she leaned in, ignoring the tremors of pain going down her legs from the landing.

"His name was Lysander," Indrani whispered. "Where you end up, carry that with you."

And with a final wrench she severed the head clean. Panting, Archer tried to get up but stumbled only for Cat to reach her side and help her stand. She also, bless her petty soul, kicked the Revenant's head. Indrani cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Fucker killed my horse," Catherine said, unrepentant.

Indrani saw that already undead were coming over the wall, the iron ladders steadily disgorging their lot, but it was the Archmage her gaze strayed to. Though bound by Masego's miracle, the Scourge had barely scuffed his robes throughout the fighting. For a bastard who preferred to fight at range, he'd proved remarkably resilient up close.

"Still need to finish that before we retreat for healing," Catherine muttered, "though at least he's still-"

A wooden pillar loudly cracked.

"Fuck," Cat said, "I really ought to know better by now."

Three of them blew and the Archmage's hand swept out, but no magic ensued. Indrani pushed away and reached for her longknives

even as Cat struck out with a spear of Night, but a shape moved in the way before it could hit the Revenant. Akua Sahelian, dressed in threads of shadow, moved stiffly so stand between the Archmage and the Night. Cat pulled the blow at the last moment.

"Go through," Akua said through gritted teeth. "I'll-"

Her mouth shut. The last pillars shattered one after another and the Archmage shook free. Masego struck from a distance with brilliant blue flames but they splashed harmlessly on a shield, and when Cat threw a few threads of shadow they were carved through with arrows of silver light. Archer cautiously approached, keeping an eye on Akua as she did. They couldn't let the Revenant flee, as it was obviously ramping up to. The Wastelander must have been sneaking up on the Archmage and gotten caught, she thought, only that didn't seem like Akua at all. Weapon-wise, if the Archmage put her in the way it shouldn't be an issue. She had only a silver dagger in hand, enchanted by the looks of it, but wait wasn't that a –

A flock of yellow bee-like spurts of flame from Masego had the Scourge putting up a swirling ball of power to suck them up, while Catherine's curving arrows of darkness were met with matches in silver light. And with both hands occupied, the Archmage had nothing left to spare when Akua Sahelian thrust a ritual dagger into his left eye.

"Please," the shade amicably smiled. "As if I would allow myself to be snatched like some petty errant soul. For that presumption, allow me to take one of yours."

The Revenant screamed with a dozen different voices as she ripped out the knife, its blade glinting with eerie light, and the Wastelander smiled in triumph. Indrani hurried forward. If they could finish the Archmage here and now... All Indrani saw was a flicker, but she was the Archer and so she knew what she'd glimpsed. An arrow. And, heart clenching, she knew where it'd been aimed. She turned, watching a circle of Night flare around Catherine but failing to stop the black-feathered arrow that punched into the side of her face. Cat fell the floor, spurting blood, and even as Akua let out a scream of dismay the Archmage leapt off the edge of the bastion.

In the distance, two crows screeched in agony.

In the sky above Hainaut there were great rumbling sounds as power gathered, thousands of mages in the plains below unleashing their rituals at least. One after the other, three great gates above the city.

And water began pouring out of them.

Interlude: Sigil

"Peace is death, stagnation of the soul. Peace is a child closing their eyes to the truth of the world: the great will partake of the small, until they falter and they too are partaken of. Strife is life and death, and there can be no more evil in embracing it than in the act of breathing."

– Extract from the 'Tenets of Night', ancient Firstborn religious text

Rumena waited, patient.

Many of the Mighty were growing restless, eager to seek excellence through strife as the... cattle around them did, but the once-and-again general knew better. The Enemy had sent hordes to batter the walls and the gates, but the Pale Crown was not one to seek triumph through brute strength. The killing knives had yet to be bared. The Mighty studied another of its kind, Mighty Borislava, as it sat on the bares stone of the street with its eyes closed. Night pulsed from it in weak waves, a feat of control considering the strength of the Secret being used. Borislava suddenly breathed out, its silver-pierced face twisting into a smile.

"They are found," Mighty Borislava rasped out. "The tunnels expand too quickly to be dug by hand or pick. The Enemy has brought acid-worms."

Rumena nodded, expressing no displeasure. That worms were not unexpected, though this marked the first instance they were used on any front but Serolen or the Pass. This cattle-city of Hainaut was as jaws of steel, the general had come to suspect, a trap laid for any unwary foot willing to step into it. Soon enough they would begin to feel the bite of those teeth,

"How many breaches?" Rumena asked.

"I have found seven, General," Borislava said. "Five of these along the western shore of the basin."

Reluctantly, it added that it might have missed a few tunnels whilst looking. Good, Rumena would not need to discipline it again. Borislava usually required such a firm hand only every half century or so, and had earned that raspy voice the first time it had allowed its pride to delude it into thinking it might replace Rumena as sigil-holder, but its usefulness in the southern expedition was feeding the pride again. Perhaps the old Firstborn would not need to end it before they reached their fourth century together.

"Zarkan," the general called out, without turning

The rylleh had been still and silent, knowing that even though bearing the title it was the weakest of its rank among the Rumena and should be wary of giving offence. Wise, though lacking in audacity. The mark of one who was to be slain and harvested before it could reach any significant measure of power. Night rewarded the knife that struck, not the knife that waited for the opening.

"Whisper into the Night," Rumena ordered its messenger. "Tell Mighty Jindrich that it is to begin attac-"

The wave rage that roared through the Night staggered them all for a heartbeat. Sve Noc were *furious*, their earthly forms in the sky above cawing in pain and anger. The general knelt, mastering the feelings not its own, and sent its humble regards above. Its goddesses deigned to answer, sending a flicker of thought: the First Under the Night. face ripped apart by an unnatural arrow. Near dead, though not quite. Already Sve Noc had sent had servant to see to the matter, moving with swift and silent steps, and the Eldest went with it. It was the Youngest, who had ever favoured Rumena and commanded its own affections in return, that bade the old drow to turn its eyes to the sky. Where sorcery made the firmament creak and groan, opening three great gates above the city.

Strike, Komena ordered.

The old drow breathed out, and Night flooded its veins. It filled it to the brim, seeping into the flesh and the organs as Rumena drew on a power it had not deemed worth using in seven hundred years. The Secret of Tolling Wrath was but a mimicry of something the Firstborn had been able to craft at will, ancient engines of destruction that the general had once turned on the unbreakable ranks of the *nerezim* as their relentless advance broke one city after another, but in the old nights it had taken a company of sorcerers and a Sage to guide them for the ritual-engine to be used. The Tomb-Maker could now do the same with but an exertion of will and power, as if a company of one. The Night vanished from it without warning, as the Secret took its final shape, and Rumena shivered.

It would not be able to call on the Secret twice tonight, it decided. Once had already set its bones to aching.

In the sky above, water had begun to pour from the gates. The Youngest cared not to suffer this affront, so see the wiles of her First Under the Night turned against a city under its protection, and so it had struck as well. The great crow had was growing, turning from a small blot of darkness in the sky to a great nightmare blotting out the stars themselves. It was, Rumena thought, beautiful to behold. And at last the Secret of Tolling

Wrath finished shuddering its way through the air, striking the side of one of the gates with a sound like a bell. Power tore at power, tearing at the edge of the sorcerous gate, and it was with amusement that Rumena saw a long beam of Hateful Light spear upwards from somewhere in the city, cutting at the edge of another gate. The Peregrine was a reliable foe even as an ally.

It was after the Light faded that the Youngest Night struck, the great crow's wrath covering the sky as its wingspan streamed with the sea of water she had flown in the way of. Bending under the weight of the water's strength, the great crow raked her talons against the third gate and there was an immediate eruption of power. Rumena's crooked fingers tightened as it saw the Youngest Night tumbled downwards, her shape diminishing until she was simply a crow once more and she began circling above the city once more. There had been something in the gate that had hurt its goddess, the general thought. At least all of the gates were now – another one blinked into existence, Rumena's sharp eyes catching the side where the Peregrine's Light had cut it.

The same gate, not completely destroyed?

Whatever the truth of it, it began pouring water again and the old drow watched as the torrent fell like sea of stones on the Fourth Army of Callow. The shields made by sorcery were not enough, breaking instantly under the impact. Soldiers died, engines were shattered and the repaired gate shuddered. Before the annihilation could be complete, however, the side cut by Light snapped and the gate exploded in burst of sorcery that lit up the sky.

"Mighty One," Zarkan quietly said. "Mighty Jindrich has claimed the right of vanguard and begun assault the tunnels. I have word from other sigils of dead erupting from other places within the city."

"Then whisper this order to all sigils, Mighty Zarkan," Rumena said. "Strike now at the dead, and hold nothing back."

"Chno Sve Noc," Zarkan fervently replied, and others with it.

Rumena the Tomb-Maker did not say more. Instead it walked to a stretch of starlight on stone and softly spoke a word of power, its will reaching for the deepest depths of its shadow where it kept only things it had not meant to see Creation while it still drew breath. Yet it would make an exception, tonight. It would have been arrogance to refrain when its goddesses took the field.

It would put on, one last time, the armaments it had once worn as a general of the Empire Ever Dark.

—

Ivah of the Losara Sigil, Lord of Silent Steps, moved with purpose.

The Eldest Night had sent it to seek its mistress' side with all haste, and so it skimmed along the edges of the Pattern to quicken its pace. It was not a fortress or a fight Ivah found when its steps slowed but instead a house. Masses of water falling from the firmament had devastated swaths of the city, including most of this street, but though Ivah saw fighting on the ramparts to the west there seemed to be no immediate threat here. Instead a fire had been lit inside the house, and Night whispered to the Lord of Silent steps that Losara Queen was within. It rapped knuckles against the door, as was the human way, and only then opened it.

This was no great palace or library, simply a hovel of humans, and so within there was only one room. The lit hearth did not catch its attention, not when instead it saw Losara Queen wan and bloodied on a mattress of straw. By her side sat the shade it knew as the Mighty Akua, though no longer did she have the scent of one who could draw on Night. Curious. The shade did not turn and so Ivah took a step forward, closing the door only to then turn to the sensation of a blade resting against its neck.

"Don't move," the Mighty Archer said, eyes hard. "There'll be no vulture's meal tonight, Ivah."

The Mighty would strike him down without batting an eye, for though human she was admirably ruthless even with long acquaintances, but Ivah shook his head. The edge bit into the throat of its skin, but only shallowly.

"This is not my purpose," Ivah said. "I have been sent by Sve Noc."

The Mighty Akua finally turned towards it, her eyes like golden flames. Its face was not composed as the Lord of Silent Steps had always seen it before. It was... drawn.

"This one's not looking to wet its beak red, Archer," the shade said. "It enjoys its place too much."

The blade moved away slightly and Ivah nodded, pleased to have been properly understood by such a dangerous creature.

"Service to Losara Queen is pleasant and I could not sit her throne," Ivah told the Mighty Archer, slightly embarrassed as it was rather forward of it to speak so plainly. "I seek not Night in this house."

"I would hope not," Mighty Archer smiled. "You wouldn't live through an attempt at harvesting it."

It was always rewarding for Ivah to see others proclaim such loyalty for Losara Queen. To serve an accomplished sigil-holder was rewarding, for who should the Firstborn learn from save the great?

"Can you help?" the Mighty Akua asked. "Hierophant did what he could and I have further slowed the spread, but we've not turned the tide."

"We sent for healers," Mighty Archer quietly said, "but she's in no state to be moved. We can't do shit but wait, at the moment."

"I have no such talent," Ivah of the Losara Sigil said. "This matters not, for I am the tool in the hand of a greater power."

The blade was sheathed, a tacit permission, and Ivah approached the bedside. It unwove the bandages delicately, revealing the deep wound below, and unexpectedly found its heart clenching. Losara had... done much, for Ivah. Opened its eyes to paths that could be tread, raised it to a position of trust and power. It did not please the Lord of Silent Steps to see the sovereign it had once sworn oaths too so harshly hurt. The left side of Losara Queen's face had been torn through by an arrow, ripping through her eye and cheek as well as shattering the chin bone. Not a mortal wound, perhaps, save if the arrow were invested with power. It must have been, for someone had clearly tried to heal the wound with sorcery and it had opened anew since.

"Poison," Mighty Akua said. "It got into the blood. And something more, too. An aspect."

It nodded, closing its eyes and breathing deep.

"I know nothing," Ivah murmured in Crepuscular. "I am nothing. I am a vessel, filled with Night."

Power surged, power beyond Ivah's understanding. The Lord of Silent Steps felt the house around it shudder as the Sve Noc herself came upon it, flowing through the cracks and forming anew on the drow's back as a great crow. Her talons dug into its skin, drawing black blood, and it breathed out raggedly.

"Fuck," Mighty Archer muttered, voice shaken.

The golden-eyed shade stared at the goddess, unmoved.

"Your intentions, godling?" Mighty Akua asked.

"I will see to my chosen," Sve Noc said, voice like the cawing of crows. "Do not think to interfere in this, shade."

"We will trust in your intentions," Mighty Akua smiled, a cold thing. "Trust in ours, Sve Noc, should you *overstep*."

Ivah swallowed a gasp as talons sunk deeper into its skin, tearing at flesh as a mind infinitely greater than its own moved its hand to rest against Losara Queen's forehead. Night flared, moving into the First Under the Night's body, and knowledge came to the rylleh.

"It is a poison that resist sorcery," Ivah spoke for its goddess. "And it was empowered, as was the arrow, by an aspect."

Night slithered down the veins of the unconscious queen, feeling out the transcendent nature of the wound, and Ivah cocked its head to the side.

"Murder," the Lord of Silent Steps conveyed. "That is the essence of the trouble, the concept that seeks to kill her even now. This 'Hawk' was no servant of the Pale Gods when she still drew breath."

"But you can fix it?" Mighty Archer pressed.

"It can be done," Ivah agreed, bowing to the pressure in its mind. "But it will not be a panacea. The eye is gone for good, and a scar will remain."

"Fuck," Mighty Archer cursed. "Would the Pilgrim do better? He said he couldn't, when he came to pick up Masego, but if we lean on the Ophanim through him..."

"It will make no difference," Ivah regretfully said. "An aspect is an aspect. Sve Noc must see to it now, before the wound worsens, and you are given warning that it will be hours before Losara Queen wakes."

The two humans traded glances, Mighty Archer hesitating.

"Go," Mighty Akua said. "I will stay."

"You sure?" Mighty Archer asked.

"Trust me," the shade replied, wryly smiling.

There was a heartbeat of silence between them, until Mighty Archer nodded.

"I do," she said, sounding almost surprised. "Take care of her, Akua."

The shade went still, and somehow looked pained. Mighty Archer offered them all a hard smile.

"Meanwhile, I'm going to go *express my displeasure* to the Hawk."

—

Mighty Jindrich picked up the corpse by the throat, idly tossing it down the tunnel.

Its armour clattered as it toppled another few skeletons, the lot of them ending up in a writhing pile. Jindrich advanced on two legs, head slightly bent for the height of the tunnel, and fell upon the pack. One strike was enough to plaster a skeleton into the stone of the wall, another was stomped to dust and out of bored disgust the sigil-holder smashed the last two's heads into each other until both broke.

"Disappointing," Mighty Jindrich said. "There has not been worthy strife since we slew the worms."

"We could head back," Mighty Lasmir said. "Head down another breach, see if there is stiffer resistance there."

Lasmir was still growing back the arm it had lost to the acid spit, having not found enough dead flesh to devour for the Secret of Consumption to truly show its worth. There was a reason Jindrich had never bothered to kill Lasmir for it even before the First Under the Night had decreed that Firstborn of the southern expedition could not slay each other.

"No," the sigil-holder decided. "The Tomb-Maker implied there would be worthy strife, should we push far enough. We will quicken the pace instead."

The rylleh bowed, passing the order down to the rest of the sigil as it had been meant to. The breach they'd forced had been a pleasant fight, but below the cattle-city the dead had seemingly dug a maze of tunnels. Jindrich found the feeling of treading underground stone once more sweet, yet it had found little opposition aside from a continuous flow of skeletons. Even splitting the sigil down several tunnels had not yielded greater prey, but the sigil-holder was wise to the Enemy's ways. Once, a very long time ago, Jindrich of Great Strycht had wielded a pick and dug tunnels for souls it had believed to be wise. Sve Noc had shown it a better path, the *true* path, but it had not forgot. These tunnels were for moving around, but there would be somewhere further below where the broken stone would be dragged so it could be thrown away instead of clog up tunnels.

There, Mighty Jindrich decided, there would be enemies worth destroying.

Its sigil moved swiftly after the order was given. They ran into undead, a larger battalion standing together – forty dead, armoured and armed – which was a good sign and decent entertainment. Mighty Draha was allowed to use the Secret of Impalement to stick them all in a line before they were smashed into the walls until destroyed. Always good for a laugh. Until then the tunnels had been a slope, but after this they were a

sheer drop with an iron ladder going down. *Promising*, Mighty Jindrich decided, and leapt. It landed atop the helm of a skeleton, crushing it with its weight, and let out an approving noise at what it beheld: a great cavern that was a hive of tunnels, swarming with corpses and dead stitched-up monsters. Even a few of the Greater Dead, these who had been Named in life, if its eyes were not being fooled.

The sigil-holder smiled, power thrumming in its flesh as it began to let it loose.

"You will be Night," Mighty Jindrich promised.

"You trespass on the realm of the dead," a voice replied. "And so will join them."

A tall silhouette, in heavy armour and bearing a large morningstar, strode forward.

"You are the one they call Mantle, yes?" Jindrich grinned.

The Greater Dead spoke not a word, but the sudden darkness not even Mighty could see through was answer enough. Mighty Jindrich laughed, letting Night rip through it and rent its body asunder before reforming it with a shell of Night.

Finally, strife worth having.

—

The lamellar of steel and obsidian still fit as it had when Rumema had been young, tightened at the hip with a belt, and the red-plumed helmet was still comfortable around its long pale hair. The marks of the ancient honours bestowed on it under the Empire Ever Dark, that of Great General Who Shook The World and Victorious Commander of the South, each claimed a shoulder with twisted braids of gold and iron. And at General Rumena's hip, the long single-edged sword of steel it had once borne into battle rested comfortably. Waiting, eager to be used at last after all this time. Sighing, the old drow straightened its back and heard it crack as if someone were treading on twigs. It popped its shoulders, loosening them, and only then did it lay a hand on the pommel of its sword.

"Mighty Borislava," the general said.

"I listen, Mighty One," Borislava cautiously said.

None of Rumena's sigil had ever seen it wear the armour. It had even the strongest of its rylleh feeling... cautious. A refreshing feeling, it would admit.

"You are to command the sigil in my absence," Rumena said. "Look for breaches and settle them, ensure the cattle are not overwhelmed."

"It will be done, Mighty One," the other drow replied. "If this one may enquire, what is it the Mighty One intends?"

Rumena's fingers tightened around its sword, and slowly it unsheathed the blade.

"Do you know why they call me the Tomb-Maker, child?" the general said.

"The tale is well-known, Mighty One," the Mighty said. "You slew many a sigil, in your pursuit of Mighty Kurosiv's end."

"The truth is older than that," Rumena chuckled. "Ysengral, I am told, meant it as a compliment."

And it flicked the blade downward, not to cut but as the focus of its will as it called on the Secret of Stone. The stone below its feet parted like a receding tide, and General Rumena walked into the earth. It closed behind its footsteps, a sealed tomb, and with a hunter's smile the Tomb-Maker burrowed deep into the earth. It felt the first tunnel within moments, moving to emerge into it and stumbling into a heated strife between dzulu and corpses. Rumena wasted no time, heading to the fore and closing the tunnel behind it with a glance. Slapping the head off the nearest skeleton, it walked back into the earth after closing the rest of the visible tunnel on the dead with a flick of its sword. The dead had dug beneath the city like ants, and now were crawling like them.

Rumena was not above stepping on the likes of them.

It wove between tunnels, closing them and burying the dead wherever it passed, until it reached a tunnel where some enchanted spikes digging into the earth resisted its will and kept it from moving the nearby stone. Unimpressed, Rumena seized the stone at the edge of the sorcery's range and moved the spikes close to the surface by indirect pressure before collapsing the tunnel. It took the time to clear the western side of the shore before moving further down, finding sheer drops leading into a large cavern where a sigil had already arrived. The fighting was heavy and the general recognized the enraged roars, having shared a city with Mighty Jindrich for some years once upon a time. It was far gone, to be this loud.

Rumena landed softly on the floor, knees creaking, and eyes the deep darkness around it with irritation. Some Greater Dead was playing a trick. The Mantle, yes? Losara had spoken of her. This war would be well rid of her continued presence. The general sped forward, knowing the darkness would be fixed in range, yet it

died before the old drow even reached the edge. Unimpressed, it leapt over Jindrich – now the size of a house, half an insect and killing even its own sigil when it strayed too close – and swept a wave of blackflame through the throng of corpses on the upper floors where javelineers were massing. They went up like dried leaves, though the use of Night caught Jindrich's attention. It struck out with a long, articulated leg but Rumena only sighed and caught the end of it. It shifted its footing, tossing the other Mighty deeper into the enemy ranks.

That ought to keep it busy for a while.

Streaks of black smoke snaked along the ground towards the general, leading back to an armoured silhouette it decided must be the Mantle. Some middling thing with a helmet looking like a hound charged at it as well, a sword and shield in hand. Disinclined to play, Rumena sunk into the stone instead of moving out of the way. Cursed spike went into the floor not long after, but it was already moving and too deep below besides. The cavern seemed to a major outpost for the dead, the source feeding all the breaches to the west of the city's great basin. Clearing it out in a single stroke ought to end the better part of that offensive in its tracks. Slowing its heartbeat the old general sunk deep into the Night and let the Secret of Stone settle at the heart of its soul.

Slowly, carefully, it began to sink Night into the bedrock beneath this city of Hainaut. As it did, extending fingers outwards, a greater force reached out and clasped its hand. The Youngest Night, talons puncturing skin even when the touch was meant to be tender, touched the general's soul. She was wroth, and her anger was cold ruin inflicted unto the world: her hands guided its own, her eyes seeing beyond the reach of what any mortal might, and together they made for the Enemy an answer. Tunnels moved, closing and then weaving themselves anew as an intricate web leading to the five great caverns dug far beneath the city. And then, one by one, the two of them bound the ends of the web to the bottom of *le Bassin Gris*, the great water basin at the heart of Hainaut.

Water began to pour, and with panting breath Rumena leaned against stone as it felt Komana begin to withdraw from it. Begin and then stop. No, the Tomb-Maker realized with dread, not stop.

Fail.

—

Ivah of the Losara Sigil went still, as two goddesses screamed and the city shook.

It had found the waterside, returning to its sigil after the Eldest Night had ended her use of its body for the mending of

Losara Queen, but the once-still waters were now as a sea taken by a violent storm. And the ground shaking had not ceased, as if some titan was hammering at the city from below with desperate strength. It turned to the terrified drow looking at it for answers, knowing it had none save for the furious howling of the goddesses in its mind.

"Disperse," Ivah ordered the sigil. "Survive."

They scattered to the winds. The Lord of Silent Steps could afford to spare them no more thought, for now the attention of its goddess was once more hammering at its mind. The rylleh stumbled forward, ending up on its knees by the shore of the basin. The waters were not only roiling, it realized with distant horror, but lowering. As if emptying. Before the revelation could sink in, talons punctured Ivah's shoulders once more and the Eldest Night screeched in its ears. The wrath that bled into its mind made the world go white and brought it to the brink of unconsciousness, until those sharp talons brought it back with sharp pain. *Service is required of you, Ivah of the Losara*, a voice whispered into its soul. And though the talons were sharp, the voice was... cool. Soothing. A companion that Ivah had kept all its life without ever knowing it.

"We are born under Night," Ivah murmured. "We die under the Night. All that I am belongs to it."

The answer pleased the goddess. The pain of talons was fading, replaced with a pleasant coolness instead. Power intertwined with Ivah's own, like a sea pouring into a lake. And the binding was deep, so deep that the Lord of Silent Steps... glimpsed. There was another crow, trapped deep below in a cage of curses and spells. Bound to the Tomb-Maker, the Youngest Night was striking at her surroundings with impotent fury. And though the plateau shook, it did not shatter. And looking closer, Ivah saw... hooks. Someone was binding the crow, containing it. Its mind was wrenched away from the sight forcefully, made to look upon the power being poured into its frame. Veiled Gods, so much Night. More than a hundred lifetimes would have let it win.

"Why?" Ivah croaked out. "It is... it is *too much*."

Footsteps sounded behind it, but it was too exhausted to move. It felt as if eve twitching a finger would be enough to kill it, and still the Night would not cease pouring into it. A shape formed before it, a drow with silver eyes and ornate robes. It – no, she – bore a silver mask at her hip.

"You come at an inauspicious time," Andronike said. "Return when we are less occupied."

"One of you was caught."

The voice of an old man. The Peregrine.

"It will be dealt with," the Eldest Night said.

"Then why are you cramming your godhead into this one?"

A younger voice, calm but curious. The Hierophant. The Eldest Night did not answer.

"The Dead King is usurping the Night," the Peregrine said. "Of that, the Ophanim are certain. You are losing."

"If our First Under the Night was awake, it would not be so," the Eldest Night furiously replied.

"Your weakness exists regardless of Catherine," the Hierophant evenly said. "Do not blame others for your shortcomings."

Ivah felt a sudden surge of mind-shattering pain, the Night's flow into its body flowing, and it let out a hoarse scream. It was... Night was being pulled at from another side, through the other crow.

"He has his hooks in you," the Peregrine harshly said. "This can no longer be allowed. If he devours your power whole, it means our annihilation."

"We are," the Eldest Night said, sounding pained, "still fighting. The strife has not yet come to an end."

"We cannot allow him to devour you," the Peregrine said, voice gone eerily calm. "You know this. Better to end Night than that."

"You would kill them all," Andronike hissed.

"No," the Hierophant said. "There is another way. One that leaves enough they will live, if only as mortals. And with what you have put aside in this one, you will still be goddesses as well."

"Paltry things," the Eldest Night said. "Remnants."

"Time," the Peregrine softly said, "is running out."

There was a long silence, and in its soul Ivah of the Losara felt goddesses speak words only they could understand. Eyes closed, it saw the truth of things: a crown of obsidian, skeletal fingers wrapping around it.

"Do it," Sve Noc spoke as one, and offered up a hand.

A dark-skinned finger was laid against it.

"**Ruin**," the Hierophant said, and Creation obeyed.

Night broke, and the city broke with it.

Interlude: Kingdom

"Fifty-seven: the greatest of powers is not an enchanted sword or cataclysmic spell, it is simply to be in the right place at precisely the right time."

– *"Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown*

The Black Queen's own favourite trick had been turned against the Fourth Army, and the results were a bloody ruin.

At least two thousand dead in less time than it took to boil a cup of water, that much again in wounded and even worse: siege engines, as well as the sappers who manned and built them, had been pulped by the great sheets of waters that had fell like a wave of stone from the Heavens. The Dead King's sorceries had been aimed foremost at the positions above the rebuilt gates of Hainaut, the siege platforms Sapper-General Pickler had ordered built before the enemy came, and there was not a soul left alive there. The results of that were immediately disastrous, for though the Fourth Army was hastening to reinforce the lost grounds the enemy had not missed the opening: beorns were already there and emptying their bellyfuls of soldiers, as great snakes of dead flesh bit into the wet stone and opened their maws to make themselves into siege ladders.

Worse, a pair of wyrms had landed atop the siege platforms and was terrorizing the attempted reinforcements. They monstrous dragons of flesh and bones, magnificent examples of what the greatest necromancer to ever live could achieve at the peak of his skill, were shrugging off Light and sorcery alike. It would take concentrated volleys of either to drive them back, and the Fourth was still on the backfoot: with so many officers dead, it was struggling to move priests and mages where they needed to be. It was a miracle, General Zola Osei thought, that the Fourth Army hadn't outright routed. Nearly every other army on Calernia would have, after seeing nearly half its number killed or wounded in so short a span. But the soldiers, first hardened on the grounds of Arcadia and then against the horrors of the Folly, held.

For now, at least. How long would that last? General Zola Osei of the Second Army of Callow let the urge to wince pass through her, refusing to indulge, for it would not do to show weakness to her staff when disaster loomed so tall. She set down the Baalite eye, choosing her words carefully as her staff tribune and senior mage awaited her opinion.

"If we do not immediately reinforce, the gate is lost," General Zola said.

"If fully commit, we risk losing the gate anyway and being swept away entirely in its wake," Staff Tribune Adnan frankly said. "I would argue in favour of ordering the Fourth to retreat while we fortify the entrance to the city and prepare for battle there."

"Should the Dead King hold the gate, the city's wards are at risk of collapsing entirely," Senior Mage Jendayi replied, shaking her head. "I won't pretend that it will not be bloody to take back the gate, but even on purely tactical grounds it is the superior decision."

They were disagreeing, Zola considered, because they were starting from entirely different premises even if neither had stated as much: Adnan considered this battle lost, and was now looking to mitigate, while Jendayi still believed victory achievable and so was willing to spend lives to reach that end. General Zola herself was not yet certain which way she leaned, though she was aware a decision needed to be made urgently. Already she had sent her two senior legates to prepare the grounds behind the city gates in case of a breach but now she either needed to send companies into the stairs leading up to the siege platforms, which the dead were certain to turn into a meat grinder of brutal proportions, or send messengers to the Fourth before it overcommitted. And the truth was that, even beyond tactical considerations, Zola was not certain if the Second had the stomach for the kind of fight taking the gates back would mean. Not since Maillac's Boot.

The general had always admired the Black Queen's almost alchemical knack for transmuting battles into loyalty, but the Boot had left scars in the Second. Losing General Hune had been a blow, even for Zola herself, but the casualties taken that day... Many still had nightmares of the hordes that never ceased coming, of the things crawling out of the much and in those dreams the gates into Twilight always closed too early. If Her Majesty had been there with them, perhaps, but now? The rumours had spread. The Black Queen was wounded, unconscious, and now her armies were wavering. Catherine Foundling had never been defeated on the field, but that legend did not apply to the Army of Callow when it stood without her. *If I don't give the order to take back the gate, General Zola thought with cold clarity, then I have declared this battle a defeat. It will not be possible to win, afterwards.*

Before she could speak, however, she caught sight of strange movement atop the gates. An eddy in the flow of the dead. Zola's grandmother had been a Mosa, and though the blood had since thinned she could still perceive motion uncannily well even in the dark. She pressed the Baalite eye against her face again, the enchantment lending her better sight through the dark, and started in surprise.

"General?" her staff tribune worriedly asked.

"Mad," Zola Osei softly said. "Utterly mad."

Goblins, it was goblins. At least a cohort's worth of them, maybe more, but it was not a battle they had come from. Zola saw as they climbed atop the great necromantic constructs – the beorns and the snakes and even one of the wyrms – as lesser dead clumsily tried to pursue. Nimble and utterly fearless the sappers, for those bags they bore could not be mistaken, spread out and every heartbeat a few more of them died from being shaken off monsters or caught by undead. And still they went, until a horn was sounded and like candles in the darks the monsters lit up. One after the other, matches struck and devices triggered as jets of green flames burst and Keter's great beasts screamed.

Robber's Marauders were not a legend without reason.

"We go forward," General Zola Osei said, throat tightening. "The Second will take back the gate."

The Army of Callow had not yet bent the knee to even odds overwhelming. It would not break that custom on her watch.

—

Like most great catastrophes, Adjutant thought, it had not been neatly done. The Grey Basin – le Bassin Gris, to the locals – had occupied maybe a fourth of surface of the plateau on which the city of Hainaut had been built, an uneven oval that began south where it ended on a waterfall over the edge and went up the middle of the capital until it ended at the beginning of the great district facing the city gates. The basin had been a major boon to the city, for both sanitation and drinking water purposes, and it'd been kept full by both underground aquifers in the rock below and regular rainfall. It was also, as of a half hour ago, entirely *gone*.

It had been expected that the undead would dig under the city, for it was one of Keter's favourite tactics and one of the few weaknesses of the city-fortress, and the Firstborn had been the natural answer to such an assault. They too were familiar with fighting underground, Night was well suited to such skirmishes and unlike humans they could see perfectly in the dark. And as far as Hakram could tell, when the dead had finally dug their way up into the city the fight had gone overwhelmingly in the favour of the drow. On all fronts they'd either held or outright beaten back the dead, in some cases even counterattacking deep below where the dead were massing for their offensive. And then it had all gone horribly wrong, somehow.

Sve Noc had been caught in a trap, of which the nature and purpose was still unclear, and it seemed that to free themselves

from it the Crows had made sacrifices. Swaths of dzulu had suddenly fallen unconscious, and even Mighty had seen their powers suddenly falter. Worse, the angry throes of the goddesses had shattered the bottom of the Grey Basin and the water had poured into the tunnels dug by Keter. They too had broken, in some places too fragile, and it had begun a disastrous chain of collapses that'd essentially hollowed out the heart of the city. Now where the Grey Basin had once stood there was a sheer drop of at least a hundred feet instead, with massive rubble and the corpses of both drow and broken undead strewn everywhere.

"Hard to tell how many died," Secretary Amelia said. "The Firstborn are shit at coordinating with other forces, they never told us how many they sent down into the tunnels."

"Concentrate on finding the Losara," Hakram said, leaning on his crutches. "They are most likely to have numbers for us."

"The curves of the cliff seems to curve inwards," Secretary Prattler noted, crouching at the edge with an interested look. "Dangerous. The plateau's structure became unstable."

"And the tunnels?" Hakram asked.

"They didn't go anywhere," Prattler, once a lieutenant in the sappers, replied. "If the dead climb the side of the drop, they'll be able to access them and enter the city by other paths than the edge. We need to close them as soon as possible."

"Send word to the sappers," Adjutant ordered. "Save for the situation at the gates, this is the highest priority."

"Won't be many left of us, but I'll see what I can do," Secretary Prattler saluted.

The reports from his phalanges were increasingly staggered, but the flow had not yet been impeded. The difficulty at the moment was keeping the Alliance high command informed, and Vivienne in particular. Irritatingly, the situation with the Firstborn remained unclear. The nature of the consequences of what had happened save for a fourth of the plateau shattering were still to be determined. Night had weakened, observably, but was that it? Answers came when his picket informed him that Masego and the Pilgrim had strolled out of the dark, that overly ambitious creature Ivah with them. Hierophant looked invigorated, the Pilgrim wearied, and neither wasted time on niceties as the 'Lord of Silent Steps' stood in the distance and seemingly entranced.

"The Dead King laid a trap for Sve Noc in a cavern below the city," Hierophant said. "And through the sister he captured, he attempted to siphon the Night."

Hakram's jaw tightened. That would have been too disastrous for words.

"Did he succeed?"

Hierophant shook his head.

"I was invited to use one of my aspects onto the Night through one of the sisters," Masego said. "What Trimegistus seized, I ruined."

"Along with most of the Night itself," the Peregrine quietly added. "The Crows hid away a portion of their power in a mortal receptacle beforehand, but most of the Night itself was unmade."

"It was a measured action," Hierophant calmly said. "It will have hit dzulu the worst, as they had reserves of Night but none of the protections of the Mighty. Nisi will have gone entirely unharmed."

"And Mighty?" Hakram asked, licking his chops.

"Weakened," the Pilgrim said. "Significantly so."

Then the Gloom that defended Serolen was likely gone as well, Adjutant thought. Dark news.

"When will the Sisters return to the field?" he asked.

"That is why we are here," the Pilgrim admitted. "You are, as always, the man who can find the needle in the haystack. The Sisters cannot reclaim their power, Hierophant tells me, until their imprisoned half is freed. Else we risk simply resuming the disaster on a smaller scale."

Hakram blinked.

"One of them's still trapped?" he flatly said.

"Yes," Masego said. "The ritual was quite comprehensive, though I expect it was primarily meant for a godhead shard and not the possession the net caught. It allowed the halves of Sve Noc to keep communicating."

"It is," the Grey Pilgrim said with grim face, "still down there."

He pointed down below, into the field of soaked rubble, and for a moment Adjutant's mind went blank. Saving someone down there? Impossible. Not, he adjusted, merely impractical. Which meant... mhm, perhaps he would be able to **Find** a solution after all.

"The Second Army has engaged at the gates," General Bagram grimly announced. "It is gaining steadily, but there is no telling the outcome of the engagement."

"And your Fourth?" Prince Klaus Papenheim asked.

"We've stabilized the flanks and are focusing on evacuating the wounded," the orc replied. "The situation is stable."

Vivienne let out a long breath and spoke the truth no one else seemed to want to.

"It has been confirmed that the Grey Legion is approaching the gates, the defences of which are still in enemy hands," she flatly said. "I am the least seasoned military leader at this table, but it seems to me that those gates are about to be smashed open."

Just a few soldiers of the Grey Legion, hulking masses of moving steel that they were, were enough to serve as a battering ram. The entire frontline of that silent army hitting the seven gates as once would be worse by an order of magnitude.

"We can still hold," General Bagram insisted. "So long as the walls do not fall, the enemy can be bottlenecked in that district."

"The east holds," Captain Nabila said. "No beachheads remain and we have mastery of both rampart and bastions."

Proud as Vivienne was of the Army of Callow, she had to admit that in the battle for Hainaut the Dominion that had distinguished itself. Almost half the western rampart, held by Alamans troops, had collapsed after being struck by Scourges until Catherine had led the Woe – and Akua Sahelian – to slay one and drive away the other. Unfortunately, the reinforcements led by Princess Beatrice had never materialized as instead they'd run into enemies in the streets of the city. They'd won that clash decisively, at the price of the Princess of Hainaut being wounded, and at the moment it was Prince Arsene of Bayeux that was theoretically the commander of that flank.

The man was not here, however, having instead sent his niece Lady Marceline to speak for him.

"The Brabant levies broke and ran," Lady Marcelline frankly said, "but we've contained the breach to a single bastion. Captain-General Catalina survived the attentions of the Archmage and she's leading the local effort while my uncle oversees the norther stretch of the rampart."

"Anyone would have buckled, hit by that kind of magic," General Bagram said with rough sympathy. "But can the mercenaries clear the enemy's foothold? If they'd don't, this all falls apart."

"Perhaps if Chosen were to lend their strength the matter could be settled more easily," Lady Marceline leadingly said, turning her eyes towards Vivienne.

It rather amused the heiress that even though she had not held a Name in years, by simple virtue of having once been the Thief people believed she still had influence over Named. As if even Catherine – Vivienne's heart clenched, but Indrani had *promised* she would survive – Catherine, with all her strength, did not struggle to keep their kind in even a semblance of order. The privileged information that Vivienne Dartwick did hold in regard to their kind was not a consequence of her thieving past at all, but of Hakram Deadhand being fiercely meticulous even when calamity was at the gate.

It was not sorcery but regular messengers, which admittedly some might argue were harder to arrange in a city besieged.

"They've had heavy casualties," Vivienne said. "On the Silver Huntress survived out of her band after they were caught in that ambush, and only barely. It might be possible to request the Headhunter and the Rogue Sorcerer lend a hand, but they have been highly mobile so mustering them may take time."

It'd been a slaughter, according to the report she'd gotten. A well-crafted ambush by what had appeared to be a half a dozen Revenants in a narrow street had taken a lethal turn when the Prince of Bones had torn through a wall and pulped the Young Slayer's head with a single blow. A black-feathered arrow had taken the Summoner in the throat almost simultaneously, and the rest had been overwhelmed. The Grey Pilgrim and Masego had arrived in time to save the Silver Huntress' life, but both the Silent Guardian and the Rapacious Troubadour had been lost.

All that with nothing to show for it, aside from a few destroyed lesser Revenants. The Prince of Bones had managed to retreat into Arcadia under fire by both the Peregrine and the Hierophant, indifferent to even their harshest attacks, while the Hawk had been long gone by the time those two arrived. The gate the Prince of Bones had used had been found and closed by the pair, but it was expected by everyone in this room that the Scourge would be back to lead his Grey Legion when it breached the city. Lady Marceline made a moue at Vivienne's answer, displeased.

"Perhaps the band of the Barrow Sword instead?" she asked. "The Blessed Artificer alone-"

"The survivors of that band are already tasked, by order of the Adjutant himself," Vivienne mildly said.

The mildness was not one that invited further argument, and with ill-grace Lady Marceline accepted the help on offer instead of the one she'd wished for. Vivienne sent out the messenger promptly, even as argument resumed as to whether or not the battle for Hainaut could still be salvaged. There was some optimism that it still could, so long as the drow managed to rally and help the Lycaonese keep walls of the pit created by the collapse of the Bassin Gris from being climbed by the dead. For now the sheer quantity of rubble and water was making it effectively impassable, but it would not last forever.

"The Neustrians could reinforce," Lady Marceline said, "at the moment they are not-"

It was like an itch, Vivienne thought. Or perhaps simply the slightest of pressures, tickling like a feather. Not the first trick of the sort she had learned, back when she was the Thief, but the first she had been *taught*. That was almost nostalgic, in a terribly dangerous kind of way. Vivienne Dartwick kept her breathing steady, concentrating as the talk of the commanders washed over her, and listened to nothing save the sound of her own breath. In, out. In, out. There, the itch again. The... weight. She had not been wrong. Idly, the heiress-designate to Callow pushed back her chair seemingly to make room for her legs as she reached for a carafe of water. Leaning covered one of her arms from sight, gave her free hand, and a heartbeat later she was moving.

The knife flew, perfectly thrown, and would have caught the hooded figure in the throat if it'd not been parried by a serrated dagger.

Prince Klaus, who'd been about to get his throat slit, was the first to draw his sword. General Bagram was but a heartbeat behind, and even as Lady Marceline backed away so she'd have room to draw her rapier Captain Nabila palmed a throwing axe. Vivienne, though, had already leapt atop the table with a fresh knife in hand. The Revenant flickered, as if made of heat mirage, and for a moment her eyes stung but she focused through the pain and flicked a second knife. It was parried, but the flickering ceased.

"Varlet," the Iron Prince hissed, striking hard.

The Revenant turned the blow aside, punching the old man in the stomach hard enough it emptied his lungs, but Bagram hacked at its shoulder and it was forced to step back. The orc's blade bit into the Prince of Hannover's shoulder but only shallowly, and Vivienne reached for the back of her belt where she kept a pouch even as she finished crossing the table. Captain Nabila's throwing axe was swatted aside and General Bagram's charge ended badly, the Varlet sweeping his legs and tossing him at the table. Vivienne's fingers closed around a handful even as she leapt, the

table flipping below her as Bagram stumbled into it, and she watched as the Iron Prince's swing was not only parried but riposted with a vicious cut that ripped across his face.

And the Varlet turned to her, even as she flew through the air, but Vivienne Dartwick smiled unpleasantly and threw a handful of golden dust into her face.

The Scourge hastily retreated but it caught her anyway, the Revenant screaming as the Concocter-made compound burned at the dead flesh and glowed brightly. Let her try to disappear with *that*. Vivienne tumbled into the animated corpse, the two of them landing in a sprawl, and as she slid out a third knife the other tried to slice open her throat. She caught the wrist in time with her free hand, struggling to keep the blade from going into flesh, but she was losing in strength and she had to abandon her knife to help with her second hand. She was losing anyway. Fortunately, the Iron Prince then kicked the Varlet in the head.

She fell to the side and Vivienne snatched up her knife, stabbing into her foe's wrist even as the Revenant tried to punch through the back of Klaus Papenheim's knee. She nailed the dead flesh, preventing the blow, and by then Captain Nabila had joined the fray with a war axe. Vivienne backed way so they'd have freer hand, getting back to her feet as General Bagram brushed past her to lend his sword to the cause of keeping the Revenant from rising. Lady Marceline, though armed, was staying far away from the foe. Vivienne threw her a scornful glance, passing the fallen table to snatch first a magelight globe from the wall and then a candle from a candlestick. She deftly turned back just in time to see Bagram rip through a wrist and then hold down the limb.

"Keep her from moving," Vivienne ordered.

"She-" Captain Nadila began.

"Do it," the Iron Prince grunted, hacking at the hood.

They managed, barely, and even then Vivienne had to dodge a kick as she approached.

"You will-" the Varlet began, but the words were interrupted by someone shoving magelight in her mouth.

"I could sneak better than that at eighteen," Vivienne Dartwick scathingly said, pressing the candle's open flame against the magelight globe. "You ought to be *embarrassed*."

And after five heartbeats exposed to fire, exactly as Masego had shown her it would, the Jaquinite magelight exploded with a loud *pop*. The tongues of flame exploded outwards, incinerating the Revenant from the inside as a jet shot out from her mouth and Vivienne avoided it by reclining her head to the right. The heat

licked at her face, but she did not close her eyes. The Revenant, head mostly consumed save for charred bones, stopped moving.

"Decapitate it to be sure," Vivienne said, drawing back.

Captain Nabila did, rather eagerly, and the corpse fell listlessly. Feeling the eyes of everyone in the room on her, Vivienne cocked an eyebrow. Had they believed her harmless because these days she wore dresses instead of leather? She was able to fit more knives in a gown than she'd even been able to in trousers. *I spent my fighting years as one of the Woe*, Vivienne thought, matching their gazes. *Does even a single one of you grasp what that actually means?* She picked up one of the knives she'd thrown, carefully placing it back against the hidden strap.

"General Bagram, I leave this in your hands," she said. "I'll be heading out."

The orc slowly nodded.

"Where to, my lady?" Bagram asked.

"Where the hammer will fall," Vivienne replied. "The gates."

—

Amusingly enough, the Barrow Sword was the only member of his band who turned out to be useless to the purposes for which it had been sent for.

Ishaq took it in good humour, proving to be in a rather amenable mood overall. His successes before members of the Blood, his usual foes, had put him in a fine mood. Hakram spent little time speaking with the man, instead guiding the efforts of the rest of the band. No one was inclined to climb down, especially now that dead from the plains below had begin to crawl all over the rubble, but the Harrowed Witch was the solution to that: the bound soul of her brother, which she could sometimes force to obey her commands, had been sent instead. With the help of Hakram's own aspect the place where General Rumena was buried had been found, which had been when the Vagrant Spear moved out.

Passing through Twilight, as she was a fair hand at sidling, she emerged even as the Blessed Artificer began raining down Light on the dead in a hail of javelins. Striking with Light and the power of her Name she'd quickly pierced through the mass of stone, allowing a haggard Mighty Rumena to stumble out. The first stumble was an appearance by the Hawk, who from her high perch atop a vulture let loose an arrow. Aimed at Mighty Rumena, Hakram discerned, but it was not to be. Another arrow hit it mid-trajectory, Archer having finally found trace of her prey, and before a second could be loosed both the drow and the Vagrant Spear disappeared into Twilight.

The Firstborn could see to themselves, then. He had done what he could. An opinion seemingly shared by Masego and the Grey Pilgrim, who had lingered talking to each other quietly but were not clearly intent on leaving. Hierophant absent-mindedly bade his goodbyes, mentioning he was headed towards the gates, but the Peregrine stayed for a longer conversation.

"The Firstborn situation seems as settled as it can be," Adjutant said.

"We but tied a bandage over a gaping wound, but it is better than nothing," the Peregrine quietly replied. "I am simply glad that we were able to free Sve Noc."

The tired-look old man, Hakram considered, had been fully prepared to kill the two goddesses rather than let them fall in the hands of the Dead King. Soberingly, he seemed to believe he would have been capable of the act.

"Losing the Firstborn entirely might have lost us the battle," Hakram warily agreed.

There was a long pause as the old man studied him, those rheumy blue eyes piercing in ways that were beyond simple sight.

"The Ophanim believe the battle is lost regardless," the Grey Pilgrim murmured.

The orc's pulsed quickened.

"And do they care to share their reasons why?" Adjutant calmly asked.

The situation was not favourable, to his knowledge, but it was not yet disastrous. The walls largely held, and though the gates were threatened they were yet to fall. In the longer view the great pit that had replaced the Grey Basin was a liability, but salvaged sigils and the still-fresh Lycaonese should be able to hold them. The battle had certainly grown more arduous, but it seemed to early to write it off.

"There is a Crab," Tariq Fleetfoot said. "It nears. They can feel it approaching."

Hakram froze. The massive necromantic creatures were as moving small cities that the Dead King used to keep the armaments of his armies in fighting fit. They were a massive resource investment, and so jealously guarded that few had even been seen, but one had been seen earlier in this campaign. The Rogue Sorcerer, when scouting Lauzon's Hollow, had believed he'd glimpsed the spells keeping one invisible to the naked eye. And though it was not the purpose of that construct, given its sheer size it would represent not so much a siege tower as a siege *fortress*.

"Masego and yourself are both capable of destroying constructs of that scale," Hakram finally said.

And perhaps the Blessed Artificer as well, or Catherine were she awake, but there were not certainties with either.

"A monster, yes," the Pilgrim sadly smiled, "but a city, with wards and protections as this Crab will have? No. Already the Ophanim tell me their influence is being restricted by some working of the Enemy's. The battle is lost, Adjutant."

His bone hand clenched.

"You want us to begin a retreat," he said.

"That I leave to military minds," the Peregrine said. "But I say this: we cannot leave a twilight gate in the hands of the Dead King."

"We can't afford to lose this battle either," Adjutant growled. "If we do, Hainaut collapses. Perhaps all of Procer with it."

And if Procer fell, the rest of Calernia would not be far behind.

"There is a way," the Grey Pilgrim said. "It would be ruinous, but there is a way."

Adjutant's brows knotted.

"What is it you want of me, Peregrine?"

"We need to wake up Catherine Foundling," the Pilgrim said. "And for that I require your help."

—

They had taken the gates, inch by inch.

General Zola had watched as the army already bloodied at Maillac's Boot bloodied itself anew taking the same wide stairs that Callowan sappers had built but days earlier, tight ranks of legionaries heaving and screaming and they drove back the howling dead. Nothing was held back. Sharpers were thrown freely, shredding the enemy's tightly packed hordes, and fireballs struck in volleys as spears of Light tore into the side of massive monsters. And the Second Army, living up to the excellence for which the Black Queen had honoured it, bled and won. The bodies fell, until all that was left was green flames and corpses no longer moving. Zola gave her orders, connecting her lines with the Fourth Army's and evacuating the wounded through the twilight gate. There were no longer mages to spare to send them back into the fight, as too few healers.

Then the gates broke.

The Grey Legion strode through the wreckage, ranks and ranks of silent steel bearing thick shields and great weapons. Light barely bit into them, sorcery was useless, but munitions made a dent. Goblinfire most of all, though the dead simply made some of the legionaries lie over the flames so they would not spread and walked on. Through traps and pits, through caltrops and spikes, lumbering but indifferent. And when the Grey Legion reached the barricades, the lines wavered. Thousands of pounds of stone and wood were shattered in moments, and then great swords and hammers scythed through the frontline of the Second, but still the Second Army *held*. Zola Osei rode up and down the line, sending heavies into the gaps and ordering concentrated fire from the priests. Ineffective as they were, they still fared better than swords.

It tightened her stomach, watching orcs and humans and goblins pile themselves on the steel-clad dead to topple them and die and drove to destroy even a single one. Spells and Light came down in volleys from the ramparts and even the burning gatehouse, lines from the Fourth having dared to venture there, but it was not enough. The Grey Legion was pushing them back, slowly but surely. Blood and guts flowed down the street until the pavestones were so slick her men tripped on the entrails of their comrades, until smoke and ash stung their eyes to weeping and munitions slowly began to run out. A barricade collapsed entirely, a street routed, the shield wall collapse and then as if by a spell the breach was closed.

The Mirror Knight had come.

General Zola had heard the man called a fool by people high and low, but in that moment she felt only awe. That sole silhouette, marred by smoke and dust, smashed into the Grey Legion as if a cliff had decided to turn back the tide. He shone brightly, glimmer of Light, and as he advanced the enemy bent around him. Steel shells cracked, armoured dead went flying and an army of one sent the darkness howling back. Zola shouted herself hoarse organizing volleys to support him, sending in heavies to hold the ground taken back. Gods, they could still win this. They could still turn this around. Slowly, one at a time, the numbers of the Grey Legion were dwindling. The Second Army would not bend before they did. And forward the soldiers went, screaming their songs in defiance.

Then the Crab came, and the hope went out of them like a candle snuffed out.

Every gain made over hours of fighting gone, just like that. The monster-fortress stood above the ramparts, ramps coming down with iron hooks to disgorge undead atop the gate wherever the goblinfire had not spread. The shape blotted out even the sky, a tall shadow belching out acrid smoke the mage lines of the Fourth fled but not always quickly enough. The spell volleys sputtered

out, and below the Grey Legion smashed into the ranks with fresh ferocity. The Mirror Knight was, before too long, a sole island of resistance in a sea of steel. And he fought on, but he could not win the war alone. Perhaps before Maillac's Boot they would have been braver, Zola thought. Perhaps if the Black Queen had stood with them, as she had through the last nightmare.

But Maillac had happened, and the Black Queen was not there. The Second Army broke.

It was a retreat, at first. Almost controlled, soldiers edging away from the enemy. But the panic spread like a stain on lace, and steps turned into a run. And once a few had begun to run, thousands did. The Grey Legion were terrifying even as part of a shield wall, who wanted to fight them *without* it? The streets and barricades clogged with soldiers trying to flee, and in the wake of the Second breaking the remains of the Fourth Army broke as well. The only saving grace was that the Grey Legion were too slow to capitalize and that the streets were too narrow for the rout to make it far. The same barricades meant to be held against the dead instead bottlenecked fleeing soldiers, the blind panicked stampede killing hundreds.

General Zola had ordered spells fired into the broken ranks to turn them around, at first, but it changed nothing and she would not be party to butchering her own soldiers like animals. She tried to organize two fresh lines of defence but both buckled under the sheer mass of the routing soldiers who were in no mood to listen to shouting officers. There was, she bitterly realized, little she could actually do. She'd lost control over her army. They might as well be utter strangers now, for all the sway she had over them. Should she arrange for a more orderly retreat? The battle was good as lost now, but perhaps she could still salvage an army out of this. The sun shook out her out of her thoughts, absurdly enough. The *sun*, in the middle of the night.

And still there it was, hanging in the sky above them, red and burning and casting golden light. A miracle, Zola thought, and remembered the strange lights that burned under the eyecloth of the Hierophant. They were, she thought, eerily similar to what now shone above her army. Which slowed in its flight, confused and worried. And slowly, as General Zola watched, something changed. One of the barricades being toppled calmed, and when she sought the sight with a Baalite eye she found that a banner had been raised. The Crown and Sword, the Black Queens own, but it was not the Black Queen flying it. Lady Vivienne Dartwick, armed and armoured and mounted as the Order of Broken Bells rode around her, headed into the fray.

And wherever she went, under that burning sun that somehow had the Grey Legion buckling, the terror turned to shame. And shame turned into determination, soldiers streaming behind her.

The tide slowed.

The tide halted.

At last the tide turned around, and as the broken armies headed back into the fight General Zola Osei thought that while Callow might only have one queen this night it had gained a princess.

Interlude: Lost & Found

"To sacrifice is to embrace end for the sake of beginning."

– Daphne of the Homilies, best known for ending hereditary rule in Atalante

Special Tribune Robber of the Rock Breaker tribe threw himself to the side, landing in sprawl as the dead scrabbled at him. No point in even stabbing at those, he figured, there were too many for a knife to do any good. Nails ripped at his face before he bit the fingers off and spat out the fouled blood, wriggling through the hands and blades of the writhing mass of undead. A sharper went off close, biting thunder in a ball, and it was an opening. Tripping through shredded flesh and iron, sucking deep of the smoke, the goblin crawled beneath some Bind in bronze armour and tumbled down the stairs. He reached for a sharper of his own but found his bag ripped open – half his munitions were gone, and he'd spent most of the other half.

Cackling out a curse, Robber ducked under some skeleton's axe swing and pushed the dead down onto the corpse on the stair below it. A blade rang against his back, biting at the mail, but he scuttled down the corpse he'd pushed and leapt off the makeshift ramp. He landed among a pack of ghouls, all of them turning like bloodhounds with bared fangs, but there was a flash of heat as a streak of flame coming from above cut through a few. Claws ripped at his side, but these creatures he could wound. He stabbed the ghoul's eyes twice, moving so it shielded him from the others as it screamed, and made a run for it down the cobblestone road as a volley of shining spears began to fall from above.

There were still a few skeletons in the way, but Robber slipped by after hamstringing one from behind with a laugh. The barricade was covered in soot and blood, but the legionaries manning it seemed in a decent enough mood as they opened their shields to let him through. Catching a few whispers of his name, Robber took a moment to preen under their gazes before getting to business.

"I'm looking for Poulain street," the Special Tribune said, dusting off his shoulders. "Happened to get lost on the way. Don't suppose any of you have directions to offer?"

"We're two blocs west, sir," a young lass answered. "It's the next barricade, can't miss it. We had to collapse the street in between when the lines buckled."

When the lines had broken, more like, but that wasn't the kind of talk the officers would be encouraging. Robber had been extracting himself from enemy lines while that disaster had come home to roost, but he's still been able to spare a glance or two for the sight of the Second and Fourth legging it. Someone – probably one of the Woe, it was usually a safe bet when it came to shit like this – had since hung a sun in the sky and what was probably Vivienne had led a countercharge that'd ended the rout. How long that would last, though, was a question digging at him. It'd take more than a lightshow and a banner to turn this around.

"Good, I was already getting bored," Robber grinned. "Do finish that Bone I stabbed earlier, would you? I hate to leave the work half-done."

A few laughs, some solemn vows, but some of them wanted more. Aside from a few stray attacks at their barricade they must not have seen much action tonight, considering they were too far to the east of the where the Grey Legion had struck.

"Preparing another spot of goblinfire, sir?" a sergeant asked. "Most the city saw your last one, it'll be hard to beat."

Not exactly. The barricade on Poulain street was where his cohort was meant to rally after it had scattered during their deep strike on the constructs. It was where the goblin would learn how many of his marauders had made it out – one in five, one in ten? For all he knew, he might be the only survivor. There'd been close calls, making his way back to safe grounds. Borer at least ought to have made it back, he decided. The good captain was already dead inside, Keter's boys wouldn't even notice he wasn't on their side.

"Half the fun's in the surprise," Robber chided. "Any of you lot heard where Lady Vivienne would be at?"

"Word is the princess is out west, with the Hierophant," the same lass from earlier said. "They're driving back the Grey Legion."

The *princess*? He eyed the others, and though some eyes had been rolled at the title no one had apparently cared to contest it. Not even the few orcs in the crowd, the lot that tended to get touchiest where the Boss was involved. Dartwick wouldn't knife Catherine, mind you. Didn't have the stones, and she had the crown neatly lined up in a few years anyway. Her little charge tonight had made a splash, though, and that devil wasn't ever going to get shoved back in the circle. All above his paygrade that, so he didn't spare more thought for it. He took his leave instead, taking to the rooftops instead of sticking down in the

streets where the dead swarmed. It was a good city for that, built mostly in stone instead of wood, and there'd been plenty of slate for the roofs.

It was easy to find where sappers had blocked off the street in the middle, since they'd knocked down houses on both sides until the street reached a temple of the House of Light with a small belfry jutting out. It was through there that Robber passed, lingering beneath the bells so he could have a proper look at the battle below.

Almost immediately, he let out a whistling hiss through his teeth. Looked good, at first glance, but he'd been in a battle or two since the College. The eerie sun up above was keeping the Grey Legion bogged down and the centre of the Army of Callow's line had steadied, but he wasn't seeing a lot of holes in the ranks of the steel-clad dead and that was bad news. Meant once Ol' Bones broke this binding, and he would, it would start smelling like rout again. The flanks, which were all Fourth army, were being pressured as well. The Crab was spitting out dead by the hundreds through ramps docked against the gates and the ramparts, and the only reason the lines hadn't shattered was that the bastions and ramparts were good bottlenecks.

The trouble with bottlenecks was that Keter tended to throw constructs at them 'til they popped, and Robber wasn't seeing much that'd be able to handle them. If a few Named were to pop up, maybe, but with the entire city being squeeze tight at the moment there was no guarantee of guardian devils – or angels. Special Tribune Robber, for the first time in years, allowed himself to curse quietly in the stonetongue. At this rate, the battle was lost. To that he only knew one solution: he'd pick up what was left of his cohort and find the Boss.

—

The Black Queen was as a needle in a haystack, were the haystack aflame and swarming with soldiers. It should have been impossible to find her, for the shade left to guard over her would be hiding her from the enemies still seeking her death, but in truth it was merely improbable.

To Tariq Fleetfoot, that change of word made all the difference

The Adjutant was not swift on his crutches, but that did not matter when their steps were guided by something greater than they. Listening to his instincts and the whispers that went beyond them, the Grey Pilgrim led them down alleys and through broken shops, weaving through smoke and screams as the city began to die around them. The western wall was going to fall, the Ophanim whispered. Soon. Time was running out. It was in a pleasure house they found the Queen of Callow, the establishment long empty and closed save through passages that the dead would

not find easily. Not so for the Pilgrim, who led the Adjutant down them until they were intercepted by drow in the colours of the Losara Sigil.

From there it was not a long walk to the madam's room, where Akua Sahelian was zealously keeping watch over the unconscious body of Catherine Foundling. As always the shade's emotions were difficult to properly **Behold**, as if muted by night or smoke, but Tariq found both anguish and a shaded sort of pride there. As if she herself had done something worth lauding, though a feeling of... transgression? Yes, transgression was threaded into it. She also held sway over the drow, who cleared the room when she asked them to and left the three of them alone with the slumbering Black Queen. Tariq was somewhat amused to see that even in times of hardship she made a point of greeting the Adjutant formally and first before cursorily acknowledging his presence.

"And what is it that brings you here?" Akua Sahelian asked. "It will be some time before the way to the next safehouse is clear, we can afford to speak some."

"The Peregrine," the Adjutant growled, "claims he has a way to wake Catherine. A ruinous one."

Wariness, in this one, but also expectation. Tariq was perhaps not trusted, but at least trusted to deliver. The insult, though, he would not let pass quietly.

"You mistake me," the Grey Pilgrim said, tone sharp for all the calmness. "Am I some petty conjurer, to pay my debts in the blood of others? I am a servant of Mercy, now and in all things: I will visit no ruin on others I am not willing to visit on me and mine."

The orc studied him a moment, then inclined his head.

"You have my apology, then," Adjutant said.

It was sincerely meant, and so Tariq let it end at that.

"I can wake the Black Queen because the Ophanim will lend me their hand in the work," Tariq said. "And when she wakes, I am to offer her a bargain."

The shade studied him.

"Were they not willing to lend their help earlier?" Akua Sahelian asked.

Tariq did not answer, which he supposed was damning enough. The Ophanim would not be moved to lend their help to one of Below's, even one allied to them, were the consequences of refusing that help not calamitous. It was not simply in their nature to do so,

to abet greater suffering to come for the sake of lesser suffering taking place. The greatest concession they could make was absence of action. Tariq had asked back then and they had refused, only for him to find his own skills with Light insufficient for the task. Even now, when they had conceded after he asked a boon of them, it ran against their nature to accept his request.

"Charming," the shade said, tone dripping with aristocratic disdain. "Still, better late than never I suppose."

The Adjutant cleared his throat.

"And what is my presence required for, Peregrine?"

Tariq cocked an eyebrow. He had believed it obvious.

"Because you are the person Catherine Foundling loves most in the world," he said. "If I were the one to call her out of her slumber, I would be refused. You will not be."

Something golden bloomed inside the Adjutant, in the wake of his words. Love returned, but there were shades to it. Relief, guilty surprise, shame, vindication? For all that they were often shallow, the orc's emotions were among the most complex that the Grey Pilgrim had ever seen. The Adjutant nodded, face grown taut.

"What must I do?" he asked, his voice rough.

Before Tariq could answer, he was interrupted.

"She will lose nothing through this ritual you press on her?"

Akua Sahelian did not quite believe him, it seemed. She had not been raised to believe in fair dealings.

"It is not a service I render her to wake," Tariq plainly said.

"Speak the words, Pilgrim," the shade said, golden eyes gone hard.

"She will not be harmed by this," the Pilgrim flatly said.

The dark-skinned woman eyed him for a moment, then sighed and moved away. Frustration bloomed in her, regret and resignation warring. Heeding Tariq's instruction, the Adjutant took the hand of his mistress with his fingers of bone and held it. Eyes closed the orc began to breathe in and out evenly. The Ophanim murmured uncertainly in the Pilgrim's ears as he approached, but he reminded them of their promise. He laid hand on the Black Queen's neck, grimacing at the sight of the fresh scar she'd earned tonight. That eye would not be returned to her, not if it had been taken by an aspect. *Enough distraction*, he chided himself. Turning his attention inwards, Tariq sunk into the Light.

He did not draw it into him, to be wielded or shaped, but instead immersed his own soul into the light of the Heavens made manifest. Earthly senses began to fade even as the voices of the Ophanim became clearer, louder. They guided his hands, patient teachers that they were, even as he shared a shard of the Light with the Black Queen's body. She was not entirely human, he saw with startlement. Differences had been made, set into the essence of her body. The work of the goddesses of theft and murder she worshipped, the old priest decided, for this seemed not dissimilar to the boon that kept the Mighty ageless: Catherine Foundling's lifespan had been stretched out, as if every day she had been born to live was to take a hundred instead to be spent. And there was more, a deeper shaping that he found only as the shard of Light found its way to what he sought.

The very soul of the Black Queen.

It was still the same mangled thing it had been since that first time he glimpsed it by campfire, scarred and cut and hacked away at. The difference was that it had been... facilitated towards Night. It had helped the stretching of the lifespan, the Ophanim spoke in their coldly ringing voices, but it had not been the purpose. Catherine Foundling could hold more Night than a mortal should, *absurdly* more. More than she would be able to wield, Tariq thought, which meant wielding had not been the purpose. A receptacle, the Ophanim said. A vessel. Not for possession, but for the hiding away of their power and godhead should it be threatened. It no longer seemed words of simple trust, when the Eldest Night had told him that had their chosen been awake the Dead King's trap would not have been a threat.

Tariq went deeper still, finding the great wisps of the Bestowal shaping itself around the unconscious woman. It tasted of authority, he thought, as if the commanding ring of her words had not told him that already. Of steel. And of something else, something that eluded his understanding. East, the Ophanim said. What would birth her Bestowal lay in the east, not this endless nightmare war. And it was a purpose bound to another, like bound stars, calling and casting away. *Is this what is to come?* The Ophanim could not tell. The future was clouded, darkened. And the Pilgrim's flicker of Light went deeper still, until it touched the sleeping mind of the queen. The consciousness swatted away the touch, as hard-bitten in the throes of dreams as it was when awake.

So Tariq left another to the work, simply bringing forth the presence of the Adjutant and the Black Queen he served. What was spoken there between souls he did not watch, for it was not his place, but as the Grey Pilgrim emerged gasping from the Light he heard another gasping breath along with his. Catherine Foundling, helped into a sitting position on the bed by Akua Sahelian, was opening her eyes. Eye, now, he supposed. He watched the

realization of that particular change sink in as she groped at her face. Her lips tightened, then she breathed out. Tariq was surprised to realize that he could sometimes glimpse the outermost edges of her soul now, of her emotions. The protection of the Crows had weakened.

"Fuck," the Queen of Callow cursed. "I got shot by the Hawk, didn't I?"

"Yes," Hakram Deadhand fondly rasped. "Even after all that talk about keeping an eye out."

"Hey now," Queen Catherine blearily muttered, "did I do hand jokes?"

"Yes," the Adjutant said.

"Constantly," Akua Sahelian agreed.

"It was one of the first things you said to me after your return from the Everdark," the Adjutant noted.

Tariq kept silent, letting her draw on the comfort of their company without spoiling it by reminding her of his presence, and she gathered herself with a sigh as the shade pressed a cushion under her back.

"That one's going to sting, and the Night feels like it's gone through a wringer," the Black Queen frowned. "Don't suppose you could bring me up to speed, Tariq?"

"We have," the Grey Pilgrim simply said, "lost the battle."

Disbelief, tempered by what he suspected was a reminder to herself about patience. It had that self-inflicted note to it.

"Breaches?" she asked.

"There have been," Tariq says. "And there will be more."

"That can be turned around," the Black Queen said. "Even if your Choir disagrees."

"The Crab has made an appearance," the Adjutant gravelled. "The Grey Legion breached the gates and the Fourth and Second routed until Vivienne rallied them."

That gave her pause, Tariq saw, though her soul was obscured to his sight.

"Your opinion?" she asked the orc.

"If we do not retreat," the Adjutant said, "we risk annihilation."

Tariq watched the shudder of fear and fury and recrimination go through her, taking no pleasure in it. He, too, understood what this night would cost them. What it had already cost them. The queen glanced at the shade, who shook her head. Her opinion was no different.

"I reserve the right to change my mind," the Black Queen coolly said, "but let's say I believe you. You didn't spend time and tricks in the middle of this nightmare to wake me up so we could have a pleasant chat, Pilgrim. What is it you want from me?"

She thought differently than the Black Knight did, Tariq noted. He tended to begin with larger concepts and then narrow in, while she instead went down winding but narrow paths. That way of silencing almost all of their mind in order to focus on the opposition, though, was eerily similar.

"There is something that can be done," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Something that will deny the Enemy its victory. But the price of it will be, as I have told the Adjutant, ruinous."

"To you," the Black Queen said, eyes narrowing.

And that is why half the world fears you, child, Tariq thought, not without fondness.

"Yes," he simply said.

"The price?"

"Blood and smoke."

She breathed out shallowly.

"A dear price," the Black Queen murmured. "And so now you would bargain."

She paused.

"Your prayer, it will end this?"

"As if it were written in the stars," Tariq smiled, amused at his own expense.

"What do you want for it?" she asked.

"Three boons," the Pilgrim said, "Once before, I entrusted you with the two I believe will be the future of my home."

"Those troublesome lordlings," she frowned.

Underneath it, though, he glimpsed a flicker of affection threaded with irritation. They had learned more from her than she knew, though she had never claimed them as students.

"See them through this war," Tariq quietly asked. "And when they take leave of you, see them off ready to face the trials that lay ahead."

She considered him for a moment, that sole eye cold and measuring. Slowly, she nodded. There was something of a commotion outside the room, but Tariq paid it no mind. Nothing could be more important than this single conversation.

"Make peace with the White Knight," Tariq asked. "That this civility may one day pass to all in service of Above and Bellow."

He glimpsed her soul the briefest moments, seeing it weigh... consequences, stories? Dozens of them in a moment, keeping and cutting and settling on an answer. The old priest found it as frightening as he did fascinating. The Queen of Callow nodded once more.

"Two boons," she said. "Your last?"

"The Ophanim will sing with me," the Grey Pilgrim said. "I alone do not have the strength. Yet the Dead King has brought with him one of the fortresses that moves, a Crab. These bear wards and enchantments, among them a great working that restricts the touch of angels on Creation."

"I do not have the strength to bring it down anymore," the Black Queen admitted. "Perhaps if Sve Noc were with me, but even so I'm not sure my body can take the strain. The poison left marks."

Tariq shook his head.

"They know where the magic was laid that fights them," the Pilgrim said. "In the belly of the best. I require of you someone that will journey there and destroy it."

She went still as stone.

"There will be no coming back from that," Catherine Foundling said.

"No," Tariq quietly agreed.

"You want me to send one of the *Woe*?" she hissed. "Fuck you, Peregrine. I'd rather roll the dice on fighting. If you really-"

Akua Sahelian gently laid a hand on her wrist. The queen paled, teeth clenching.

"No," she said.

"It would be just," the shade softly said. "Or close enough."

The Adjutant, tellingly, spoke not a word. His soul had measured deaths, and found this one the most acceptable.

"I said *no*, Akua," the Black Queen harshly repeated. "You don't get to just jump off a bridge and call it quits, that's not-"

"Well now," a voice drawled. "Looks like I came in at just the right time."

Tariq turned, brow raising when he saw a goblin covered in soot, blood and dust swagger in. A sapper, he recognized, and he'd even seen this one before. Special Tribune Robber, he believed? He was rather famous in the Army of Callow as one of the Black Queen's finest men.

"Robber, what are you doing here?" the Queen of Callow frowned.

"Volunteering," the goblin grinned. "Sound like a proper evening, it does. Raiding a Crab, destroying ancient magics, calling down the wrath of angels? Can't believe I almost missed it."

Yet he had not. Whose hand had it been, Tariq wondered: Above or Below's?

"Come off it," the Black Queen sharply said. "Your cohort-"

"Only thirty-two of us left," Robber said. "It's not even a company. But we'll do, Boss. For this, we'll do."

"The war's not over, Robber," she tried. "There's still battles-"

"That'll be more glorious than this?" the goblin laughed. "Doubt it. Wouldn't matter even if there were, Cat. This one's got our name written on it."

"Why are you all *so fucking eager* to get yourselves killed?"

Catherine Foundling roared out, lights dimming in the room.

"Robber, I swear on the Gods Below that-"

"It's settled, Boss," the goblin smiled, almost gently. "We're going. Even if you tie me up, you know I'll slip the bounds and go. It's done. The arrow's been loosed."

The anger went out of her like a flame guttering out. The glimpse of her soul that Tariq found had him looking away. He'd not seen such violent, exhausted grief in a long time. It was... not pleasant to behold.

"It doesn't have to be like this," the young woman said, voice raw.

"Only cowards live to fifteen, Cat," Special Tribune Robber said, smiling. "It's been coming a long time, tonight."

Tariq closed his eyes, knowing it had come to a close. The pieces were falling in place. One more, now, and it would begin.

—

The clouds of acidic smoke that the great undead dragon spewed out were so large they must have been visible from the other side of the city.

The mages would do what they could – the Rogue Sorcerer had gone to lead them – but the damage was already done. The Brabant conscripts, freshly returned back to the rampart, broke and ran again. The officers that would have been their backbone laid dead in a marsh to the east of Hainaut, where Klaus himself had ordered them burned. Panic was a vicious thing, in a battle, worse a killer than any sword, and tonight it bit deep at the men holding the western wall. Once the conscripts fled the fantassin reinforcements they'd been screening were left exposed, and as another wave of beorns came over the walls to protect the ladders being secured the fantassins began to waver as well. They were not cowards, that lot, but they were stuck between two strengthening enemy beachheads with no real way out.

The original order likely had been to clear the bastion the Archmage had hit earlier, as it was the easier flank of the two, but it all went sour when the dead began striking at their back as they fought. The dead in the bastion withdrew just enough that the fantassins would be able to flee down into the city, and flee they did. The last stretch of the western wall, to the north, was still in the hands of the Prince of Bayeux and holding strong. Even if they held, though, it would change nothing. All that Arsene Odon would achieve was preventing the dead from hitting the back of the Army of Callow by the rampart, with the rest of the wall in the hands of Keter they were free to push into the city itself.

Prince Klaus Papenheim knew better than to shy away from uncomfortable truths after swords left the sheath, so he did not flinch away from this one: the battle for Hainaut was lost. It was now his duty to act so that the nature of this defeat did not end up destroying the Principate and the rest of Calernia with it.

He ordered barricades raised to block most streets along the line of the fallen rampart, manned by soldiers of Hannover that would not hesitate to kill anyone trying to force their way, but left two large avenues free for the conscripts and mercenaries to feel down. He sent for Princess Mathilda, and so received his first blow of the night: the only answer brought back by his captain was a black-feathered arrow, sodden with blood. Pushing down the grief – he still remembered her as a girl, close as sisters with his own – the Iron Prince forced himself to keep his mind on the battle. He sent the Neustrians to secure the gate into Twilight,

and his most trusted captain to make sure that the Gigantes were out of the city before they could be killed and raised.

Word was sent out east to the Dominion informing them of the situation and warning that an orderly retreat was the only path left to them if the Grand Alliance did not want to turn Hainaut into the doom of the continent. Klaus sent word to General Bagram so that the Army of Callow might join the effort, learning that while the Second Army still held the Fourth was buckling on the walls. If they broke too early, the Prince of Hannover knew, then this would turn into a massacre. The surviving parts of the Fourth Army held the bastions on both sides of the gates that were preventing the dead from striking at Prince Arsene and the Dominion from behind. Bayeux would fold in mere moments should that happen, if they hadn't already, and the Levantines were already seeing redoubled assaults on their positions. They were at risk of breaking too, should they be flanked, and if they did break then the battle would grow beyond salvaging.

"We need to bolster the positions of the Fourth," the Prince of Hannover told his captains. "If we do not, this city takes us all."

"Horse won't cut it for holding a bastion," Captain Engels said. "And we can't move foot quickly enough, my prince, even if we can even move it at all. Callowan lines are bunched up, they can barely even move their own troops."

"We could cut through the Bayeux positions," Captain Abend suggested.

"If they rout while we cross, or even after, then we'll be trapped there," Captain Tietjen objected.

There was no easy answer, the Iron Prince thought, and the longer they dithered the fewer options they would have left. And yet he found himself at a loss. His army was already stretched too thin, and the Neustrians needed to keep the gate. Could the Firstborn be called on? They seemed to have rallied enough to aim fire at the undead scaling the pit sorcery had made in the heart of the city, but they had lost a step. Worse, General Rumena missing they had no leading officer: only a mass of bickering tribes which it might take too long to gather into cohesive reinforcements even if they were inclined to lend a hand. They would have to risk it, Klaus finally decided. What else was left?

The answer of the Gods came in the face of another weary old man in faded grey robes.

"Prince Klaus," the Grey Pilgrim tiredly smiled.

"Peregrine," the Prince of Hannover replied. "You bring word?"

"I bring death," the Pilgrim said. "Nothing more or less."

The old general softly laughed.

"Death is our sole birthright, Peregrine," Klaus Papenheim smiled. "It's why it matters to spend our lives well. It will be a good one I hope?"

"Among the finest," the Grey Pilgrim tiredly smiled, and told him the plan.

—

Between his height and the orc's crutches, they had about the same pace.

"Did you know," Robber idly said, "that you were the first person I ever spoke to, at the College?"

"Liar," Hakram snorted. "I heard you picked a fight with Yagin from Tiger Company while you were still waiting in line for dormitory assignments."

"It's really quite unpleasant how hard you are to lie to," Robber complained.

"It's not easy, you're just a naturally honest man," Hakram assured him.

Mortally offended, the goblin gasped and put a hand over his heart.

"Fighting words, greenskin," Robber said. "The honour of my deep and ancient house—"

"Your tribe is called the Rock Breakers," Hakram skeptically noted.

"Because even our newborn babes are mighty enough to split a boulder with a single punch," Robber lied.

Hakram looked him up and down, then cocked an eyebrow. He said nothing, which made it even worse.

"Don't think I won't stab a cripple," Robber warned. "We do it all the time, it's much easier than stabbing people who aren't cripples."

"Have I lately mentioned my deep respect for you culture?" Hakram gravelled.

Magnanimously, Robber only kicked his chin. Godsdamnit, the bloody thing was armoured. That prick.

"You'll be one of the last to die when the Great Goblin Conspiracy finally takes the world," Robber conceded.

"Merciful," Hakram praised. "You are in a fine mood indeed, Lord Robber of the House of Lesser Footrest."

The goblin preened, glorying in the way that he'd worked himself back up to Lesser Footrest last month. His was an ancient and honourable title. And when Hakram leaned over to slip something into his munitions bag, he was even in a good enough mood to pretend not to notice. They'd reached the end of the path, anyhow. The last of his cohort were gathered, Borer having just come back with a fresh loadout of munitions. Now all that was left was for the Lycaonese to open the dance. The two of them lingered in silence for a long moment.

"Anything you want Pickler told?" Hakram quietly asked.

"There's nothing to tell," he said. "I left her a letter, though. Make sure she gets it?"

His friend – his oldest friend, perhaps even his first friend – nodded.

"I won't say it's been an honour," Hakram smiled.

"Gods forbid," Robber grinned back, then hesitated.

He looked to the side, embarrassed.

"We had... we had times, didn't we?"

"The best," Hakram replied, voice hoarse.

They stayed like that for a longer while still, until the sound of horses nearing told them time had run out.

"Make sure Cat doesn't let it eat at her," Robber quietly said. "It's not about her, not really."

"I know," Hakram said.

They met eyes, the goblin and the orc, and clasped arms.

"Somewhere, sometime," Robber grinned.

"We'll meet again," Hakram finished, smiling.

They let go of their arms and not another word was spoken.

—

"Strike hard and do not slow," Prince Klaus Papenheim said. "Stay with your captains. If you are split from your company..."

He paused, raising an eyebrow.

"Find a nice place to die," he suggested.

Laughter shook his riders. The jest was an old one, well-worn gallows humour of the kind his people tended to prefer.

"Our duty is not to be victorious," the Prince of Hannover said, "for there is no victory to be had there. We open the way for the handpicked sappers of the Black Queen, that they might destroy the enemy's sorcery and free the Pilgrim to strike down evil."

The answering cheers were hoarse, but they were wholeheartedly meant. There were less than a thousand of them left now, even after they'd taken southern horses to fill the ranks. The Prince of Hannover looked at them with old affection, that old soldierly lot that'd followed him through a hundred battles on a hundred fields. Not so young now, for he was long past his own youth, but though the faces had grown wrinkled and the hair had gone white the eyes remained iron.

"We've had battles," Klaus Papenheim said. "And we have kept the oaths we swore. I'll not preach to you what is at stake, sons and daughters of Hannover. Haven't we all heard that song a hundred times already?"

The world was always ending, one piece at a time. There was always a doom over the horizon, taking its first newborn steps even as you buried the last.

"Behind us is spring," the Iron Prince said. "Ahead of us is the Enemy. You are Lycaonese, so what more is there to say?"

Klaus Papenheim, Prince of Hannover, unsheathed his sword. A thousand riders did with him, the steel bright under the stars of the Twilight Ways. Before them the gates yawned open, revealing a city devoured by nightmares. Horns sounded, defiant in the gloom, and backs straightened.

"Forward," the Iron Prince shouted, and forward they went.

—

Tariq sat, not in a dignified stance as some straight-backed sage but instead like an old man lowering himself against the broken wall of a temple, his bones aching. He would not be found easily, he had been promised this. He sunk into the Light, as easily as taking breath, and let it fill him. The Ophanim, his old friends, were close. Yet they could not help him through the last step, not yet. All that was left to do was wait.

Wait and trust in the valour of others.

—

They plowed into the enemy ranks, smashing and hacking as they went. Through the flat grounds of the gatehouse, green flame licking at their sides as they rode through death and broken engines, through ghouls and skeletons and even a roaring beorn. The old banner of Hannover held high in the wind, the lone spearman on the wall and the old boast of the House of Papenheim beneath it. War cries resounding through the night as hooves thundered, Klaus Papenheim and his thousand rode up the ramps leading into the Crab. That city-monstrosity, laden with monsters and corpses it was pouring out into Hainaut. Undead and horsemen tumbled down below but they pierced through the dead and took the ramp, clearing it for the sappers to follow them. But a few of them, small creatures that they were, and so quick on their feet.

They would make it to the end, if the Iron Prince and his riders died loud enough.

Curses streaked at them in swarms, arrows and javelins flew, but tonight the Heavens were with the Lycaonese. The wind turned, the Crab shook, and onwards the riders went into the city. A thing of iron and bone, of stone and dead flesh, and the fumes it belched out billowed foul as the horsemen pressed through. Pikes came for them first, gathered hastily in a street, but Klaus Papenheim laughed and began to sing.

*"The moon rose, midnight eye
Serenaded by the owl's cry
In Hannover the arrows fly."*

Voices swelled his own as the refrain came and their riders fell into a wedge.

"Hold the wall, lest dawn fail."

They punched through, pikes skittering against heavy armour or finding enough purchase that horse and rider tumbled into the mass and broke the formation. The rider went on, down the street and towards the burning forges ahead.

*"No southern song for your ear
No pretty lass or merry cheer
For you only night and spear."*

Too few pikes, the second time, but the Enemy laid the ranks on thick. As if to make a rampart of bone and armour, a barricade of writhing dead. Skeletons raised swords and axes, put up shields and their ranks kept swelling. But it would take greater wheat than this, to dull their scythe.

"Hold the wall, lest dawn fail."

Screams as javelins and curses came at them from the sides, biting through even plate, but even as the riders died the ranks

of the dead shuddered under the impact of a thousand heavy horse. It was in the hands of the Gods, for a moment, but even through the melee the Lycaonese pressed until there was only room ahead once more.

*"Come rats and king of dead
Legions dark, and darkly led
What is a grave if not a bed?"*

The forges were deeper, into the belly of the beast, and their fires burned bright as a noonday sun. It was a place precious to the Enemy this, and it mustered a worthy defence for the last hall barring entry to it. Undead by the hundred, and looming above them were monsters. Beorns and great snakes, even flocks of cacophonous buzzards. And above them all, the mightiest wyrm that the Prince of Hannover had ever seen. A hulking beast, large as a fortress and with blood-red eyes.

"Hold the wall," Prince Klaus shouted, "lest dawn fail."

It was to be their last, he could feel it in his bones. The wyrm spat out poisonous green flames and fumes, sweeping through the front ranks, but even the panicked and dying horses tumbled forward into the tightly packed ranks of the dead. Buzzards came down in swarms, sorcery lashed out with eerie screams, and the last riders of Hannover smashed into their enemies. They were too few, too tired, and still they pressed on. A spear killed Klaus' horse under him and he fell on his stump, screaming hoarsely, but he rose before he could be slain and fought on sword in hand. They sang still, but the voices were fewer. The charge spent.

*"Quell the tremor in your hand
Keep to no fear of the damned
They came ere, and yet we stand."*

One corpse after another, his arm was burning his face bleeding from half a dozen cuts. He'd taken a spear in the side, a wound that would kill him before long, but still Klaus Papenheim pushed through. And again and again and again, until a roar shook his bones and a gaping maw opened to reveal the flames igniting within. The Iron Prince struck with all his might, with all his rage and his sorrow and his pride, and with a great crack a fang broke.

"So we'll hold the wall," the Iron Prince murmured, "lest dawn fail."

The fire swallowed him whole, and the last though Klaus Papenheim ever had was for his niece.

It was an entire city trying to kill them, even the stones and the streets., and Robber could not remember the last time he'd had this much *fun*.

Tabler croaked it when something that liked looked like a massive bone scorpion speared her through the stomach with a stinger that was screaming, which was a very sporting heads up from Keter that their infiltration had been noticed. The dead were thousands they had nasty little critters, but what was that to a sapper of the Army of Callow? They were quicker, better at scaling walls and objectively prettier in the eyes of the Gods Above and Below.

"Mind you," Robber told his flock, "Borer does bring down our hallowed company's average in that regard."

"I apologize, sir," Captain Borer dutifully replied. "Shall I write myself up for distractingly ungainly looks again?"

"Eh," Robber mused, "we'll see how I feel about it tomorrow."

That had them all cracking up, of course, which got Wiggler a javelin in the throat but that was a cheap price for comedy of such quality. The Pilgrim had burned where they needed to go into their minds, though the old man had refused to entertain the Special Tribune's inquiry about whether being marked by angels in such a way could be considered theologically inappropriate workplace touching, so there'd be no getting lost. Brasser died blowing himself up so that a flock of buzzards wouldn't kill them as they crossed a makeshift ladder-bridge, but that was a sign they were making progress!

It was fairly dickish of the Dead King to begin setting fire to buildings so they wouldn't be able to cross the rooftops, in his professional opinion, but that was nothing that liberal use of sharpeners and a healthy disregard for personal safety couldn't fix. You absolutely *could* blow up a fire, if you had enough munitions at hand. They lost Racker to the beorn awaiting them on the other side of the explosion, though, which was a genuine loss since with her gone there was no one at hand that everybody else disliked the most among them.

Unfortunately, it seemed like the streets ahead were now swarming with dead and buzzards. Fortunately, there was a solution: they used demolition charges to blow through the layer of stone and bone beneath them, then slunk down a rope onto the lower level. They only had enough charges to do it once more, so naturally they immediately repeated their exploit. Grabber stayed behind just a little too long, though the greater tragedy was that Lilter's joke about 'grabbing the opportunity' was better than the one Robber had been mulling over about grab-bags.

The ran into devils when they got close to the ritual chamber, which was a nice change of pace. Not even the Praesi kind, these

ones were like pulsing pustules of flesh whose proximity alone was enough to cause intense pain. Lilter blew herself up to make them a path, which had the secondary benefit of ensuring that Robber was once more without the contest the funniest of their little band. There were only seven of them left, by then, but they were nearly at the chamber. Trouble was that literal hellhounds were on the trails, by the barking and smell of sulphur.

You learned to recognize all sorts of stuff, if you spent enough summers in Ater.

"We'll hold," Captain Borer said, sword in one hand and sharper in the other. "Go ahead, Special Tribune."

Robber met his eyes, surprised even though he shouldn't have been.

"You were a treat," Robber finally said.

"Always thought you were a prick," Borer cheerfully replied. "Go die like a sapper, Rock Breaker."

He grinned back, scampering away before he could be caught up in the coming mess. He found the chamber below, just the way the Pilgrim had seared it into his mind. No more mages around, just a massive chamber of obsidian with carved runes everywhere. Gingerly he tried a foot first, and when it didn't burst into flame went further in. His own bag had been filled, from the start of this waltz, purely with goblinfire. And one more thing, he recalled late, that Hakram had slipped in. In the distance he heard the crack of sharpeners going off. Little time left.

It was a scroll, Robber found out. A fancy one, there was even a seal at the bottom. He scanned the contents, curious, and froze. *By my authority as Queen of Callow, I so raise Robber of the Rock Breaker tribe to the title of noble, under the aforementioned honour: Lord of the House of Lesser Footrest, to be held in perpetuity.* It was the royal seal below but there were fresher words, the ink a little smudged. *No matter where you end up, Catherine Foundling had written in that ugly scrawl of hers, you will be one of mine. Sooner or later, I will come to collect.* Screams, fighting. The devils were close.

Robber's throat closed as he traced the words with a trembling finger.

"The best," he whispered.

He struck the match, the parchment taking fire, and with a wide grin he plunged the burning scroll into the bag. He closed his eyes, feeling the burst of fire washed over him, but it didn't

hurt at all. He thought, somehow, that even in this deep place he was hearing something.

Robber died hearing the wind.

—

The sky cleared, and Tariq looked down from above.

All those who would be able to escape tonight had. There was no more call to delay. The Ophanim, the companions of his life, laid their hands on him. They were sad, grieving, but he smiled.

“It is a beautiful thing,” Tariq Isbili said, “to die smiling.”

Tariq of the Grey Pilgrim’s Blood breathed out, the world breathing out with him, and let his blood sing out into the world. The oldest treasure of his line, the secret of the **Shine**. The pilgrim’s star, his people called it, and they spoke truer than they knew. Every Isbili that ever lived had it coursing through their blood, the blessing of that star. It was a tie, and though Tariq could no more move the star than an ant could move a tower he was not alone.

The Grey Pilgrim pulled, and the Choir of Mercy pulled with him.

The warmth filled him, pleasant at first but soon burning. Searing. But he was in a place beyond pain, filled only with light, and so Tariq Isbili did not flinch. Not even as he felt the burn spread through the bloodline, through every last one of his kin. Through everyone with so much as drop of Isbili blood. And the Ophanim threaded their fingers through his, heaving even as his insides charred and his kin turned to ash, until at last the sky gave.

In the darkness above, a star went out.

The Grey Pilgrim opened his eyes, looking down at the city below and the hordes of the dead. And though he bore the weight of many griefs, in that moment it was not his many sins he thought of. It was a balcony in Alava that came to him, the pear trees beneath and the woman he had once loved. Perhaps, he thought, he might yet see her again.

Tariq Isbili saw streaks of white pierced through the night sky and died, smiling, as stars began to fall.

Chapter 78: Keter’s Due

“The parity of light and darkness is a false perception. Light is transgressive, an imposition on the natural order, and so will always spend itself into nothingness.”

*Be as the dark and you will be beyond struggle, ever
returning when the flames die out."*

*– Translation of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely
attributed to the young Dead King*

The turn of the year had begun with a boy I'd thought I might save, and then a hard lesson remembered to me by the Dead King. That this was not a war as I had known wars before, that there would be no miracles or saving graces to this ugly, brutal, exhausting struggle to the death we were having. I thought of that night again, as I watched stars fall on the city of Hainaut, and the lesson echoed once more: sometimes we just lost.

Masego's spell was little more than a window between Twilight and Creation, but what it showed was... I knew the forces at work, but still the sight caused me in me a sort of primal awe. The meteors, shards of a broken star, were massive. The first that struck toppled half the city in a streak of dust and white flame, scouring it clean of life, but the rain did not end there. Again and again the capital and the valley around it were struck until there was nothing there but barren glass, and still in the distance stars fell. How much of Hainaut had been scoured in the span of a few moments, I wondered?

It'd not been undead alone that'd still been in the city when the star fell. The Fourth Army was gone, as were most of the Hannover men and the Prince of Bayeux's army. Almost all of the Alavan troops had been lost as well, since they'd served as the Dominion rearguard, and at least half the Firstborn with them. It had been a cruel defeat before the Pilgrim began his last hurrah, but after the star had struck the results could only be called disastrous. Not a single army in fighting shape had made it out of Hainaut except maybe the Neustrians, and they'd just lost their princess.

I couldn't even blame the Pilgrim for when he had begun to call down the wrath of the Heavens, he'd not had any choice. There would be no repeat of the sacrifices – my heart clenched, my nails dug into my palms – that had bought him that opening, and risking a longer wait might have made it all worthless. He'd done what he could and turned this into a disaster for both sides at least. The Dead King, for all that he was the victor of the field, did not have an army left in all of Hainaut. The meteors had seen to that. Much as I itched to blame Tariq for what I'd lost tonight, it would have rung hollow to try it when he'd died trying to save all of Calernia.

And he had, Gods forgive me. If we'd simply evacuated, fled back to our defensive lines, then the simple amount of corpses swelling Neshamah's ranks would have been enough to overwhelm us to the south after we retreated there to lick our wounds. And once the Dead King pierced into Procer, got his hands on cities

and teeming masses of refugees, then it was all over. The Peregrine had averted that doom for us all, and I held that truth close as I watched the pieces of a dead star rain down on Creation.

"Some of the Scourges will have made it out," Indrani quietly said. "The Hawk for sure, maybe the Prince of Bones as well."

"The Grey Legion's good as gone," I replied, forcefully calm. "That, at least, is a gain."

There had been few enough of those tonight that I would find the silver linings where I could.

"The Crab is destroyed as well," Masego noted. "Though it likely was in a practical sense even before the meteor struck it, given the amount of goblinfire burning within."

My fingers clenched. Blood dripped down from my palm onto the soft grass.

"It was a good way to go," Archer murmured. "They will sing songs of him, Catherine."

I would rather they didn't, I thought, so that I might hear him sing again instead. But I'd known deep down that Robber would find his worthy death on some battlefield or another. He'd been looking for years, trying even starker odds against ever sharper foes. *You would have hated peace, I thought. Despised it to the bone.* A long silence trundled along, the only sound that of our steady breaths. My cheek clenched in frustration as I tried and failed to blink an eye I no longer had.

"It will end soon," Hierophant said. "The power is spent."

I nodded. The pale streaks were waning, growing rarer. Even the might of the Choir of Mercy anchored on the death of a great man was not a force without limit.

"Your officers want to speak with you," Indrani reminded me.

"They can wait," I said.

General Bagram was dead. Vivienne has saved his life from the Varlet only to die trying to rally the Fourth mere hours later. General Zola was now in overall command of my remaining soldiers, something eased by the hard truth that aside from the remains of the Second I had few of those left. Later I would speak to her, but for now I saw no point. Indrani brushed a hand against my arm, startling me as I'd not seen her coming. I had blind spots now, I reminded myself. I'd need to learn to compensate for them. I shook away the touch, even if it was meant in comfort. Archer knew me well enough not to take it badly. She

left me to the way I had always preferred to handle my grief: alone. Her footsteps were soft against the grass as she left.

Masego stayed, but his eyes were on the vista revealed by his spell. He'd always been the most accommodating of my friends when it came to sharing solitude. It made him the easiest to be around when grief was still raw.

The last streaks of light softly died, leaving behind only a darkened sky and one fewer star than there had been at the beginning of the night. Hainaut was a ruin. The city itself was shattered, blackened stone smooth as glass rising in jagged pillars that looked eerily like teeth. Smoke and ash were on the wind, swirling thick. The land around the capital was no less a ruin, the plains scoured down to burnt bedrock as far as the eye could see. Nothing would live here for decades, centuries even. Of the armies the dead there was not a trace left, not even of that behemoth Crab that had tipped the scales in the Dead King's favour at the end. It was all dust on the wind, hundreds of thousands of souls released back to whatever Gods they had kept to.

There was a terrible peace to it all, I thought. Masego turned towards me, raising an eyebrow in silent question. I nodded and he let the spell die. It ended in time for me to hear footsteps approaching, the cadence of them telling me who they were before I turned. That hobbling walk was Hakram on his crutches, while the still unnaturally smooth stride was Vivienne's – she had once walked rooftops as other women did streets, and the touch had never quite left her. Leaning against my staff, I watched them approach with apathy. Vivienne looked away when I met her gaze. Trying to avoid looking at my eye, I realized, and suddenly felt self-conscious. I would have brought down my hood, were it not too obvious a reaction.

"Catherine," Adjutant greeted me. "The starfall has ended?"

I cocked an eyebrow at the empty talk, gaze moving to Vivienne.

"What is it that you two need of me?" I plainly asked.

She grimaced, and this time did not flinch away from the sight of the gruesome scar I had instead of my left eye.

"You need to hold a war council," Vivienne said. "At least for Callow. General Zola's keeping it together, but she doesn't know where to go from here."

"It's obvious," I tiredly said. "We lost the battle but the Pilgrim salvaged us an opportunity with his death. If the White Knight succeeds to the north then we will escort the Gigantes to the shore and ward Hainaut from the dead. If he has lost, then we

retreat for the Cigelin Sisters and fortify what we can against the coming onslaught."

I did not doubt that even as we spoke the Dead King was marching troops through the bottom of the lakes to our north, trying to turn the setback into an opportunity. We'd destroyed the Twilight Gate here along with the rest of the city, but we still had pharos devices for mass-deployment of our remaining forces. Returning to Creation at the moment would be pointless, especially since the ruins were still hazardous and there was no water left to drink, so we would be staying in the Ways until the sun came up if not even longer. There'd be no point in leaving the Ways just to enter them anew when we marched either north or south.

"It might be obvious to you, Catherine, but not others," Hakram calmly said. "More than that, you must be seen. The Lycaonese lost both their rulers in the span of a single night. The Alamans are shamed and desperate, with only a destitute Princess Beatrice to calm them. The Dominion mourns the Grey Pilgrim without even a body to burn. The Firstborn huddle among themselves and speak to no one. And the Army of Callow broke tonight, for the first time since it was founded."

"You're needed, Catherine," Vivienne said. "The Black Queen is needed."

When fucking wasn't she? My fingers balled into a fist, blood sliding down the skin from where my nails had bit through skin. Hakram's eyes flicked there, though with his nose he would have smelled the red long before that.

"Enough," Masego said, voice grown hard. "If you have the voice to ask, use it settle the troubles you bring her instead."

I started in surprise, half-turning.

"Masego-" Vivienne began.

"She should be asleep, Vivienne," Hierophant said, eyes burning. "She insists on remaining awake, so she will, but do not mistake this for her being in a fit state. You ask too much."

I found myself both warmed and irritated.

"I can speak for myself, Zeze," I said.

"Then do so," Masego bluntly replied. "But I will not let this war drag you into the grave, Catherine. I have not forgotten what Aunt Sabah's death did to my family, and I will not allow Robber's death to bloom that sickly flower twice."

I might have taken issue with the tone if he'd not spoken the words that followed. I remembered it too, the brittle look in Black's eyes after Captain was killed. I had not loved Wekesa the Warlock while he lived, but I would not do the man's shade disservice by denying he had cared for Sabah just as deeply. That evening in the Free Cities had left scars on all the Calamities, even if some had been subtler than others. I would not blame Masego for dreading the only family he had left might come to the same end. I sighed, drawing their attention.

"There's nowhere for them to go," I said, gesturing at the Ways around us. "And it will take more than my carcass being paraded through a camp to fix this. I'll see to the Army of Callow later, but the rest can wait."

Masego beamed at me, which was comforting even though I knew this was probably the wrong decision. I was tired enough that I found it hard to care: there was only so much beating that this thrice-dead horse could take. I met Hakram's eyes and found surprise there, but he nodded. Vivienne was harder to read. Was she disappointed? If she was, I'd cope. The legend I'd set was not one I could live up to. If this campaign should have made anything painfully clear for all the world to see, it was that I didn't always have the answers. I'd pushed for this offensive from the start and even if I'd not been the only one to do so my influence had objectively been key. This catastrophe was on me, if it was on anyone at all.

Most the people I could have shared the blame with were dead.

"Leave me," I said. "I-"

My sentence went stillborn when I felt a shudder of indignation through my tenuous bond with the Night. Sve Noc were enraged, and though I found the shades of emotion difficult to parse I did pick up that this wasn't about the Firstborn. In the distance, two great crows took flight. Masego was not far behind them, wrested sorcery already opening anew the same window into Hainaut he had allowed to lapse. The spell was not as stable as the last time, the edges buzzing and the spell itself letting out trails of smoke here in Twilight, but what we saw could not be missed. Among the great fangs of black glass which were all that remained of the city of Hainaut, a great spell was stirring up a storm of ash.

It was not one of ours.

"Hierophant, what am I looking at?" I calmly asked.

Masego remained silent for a time, golden glass eyes darting back and forth as they parsed the glimmers of the spell that could be seen through the ash. Thick, curving cords of runes spinning in

cycles without making a sound, a dull but growing pale sphere at the heart of them.

"I am... unsure," Hierophant admitted.

The Crows plunged through the night sky in a precipitous glide, Andronike and Komena claiming my shoulders and sinking their sharp talons into the steel of my pauldrons. They hissed urgency at me and I raised my bloodied hand to clutch my staff.

"Whatever it is, we can't let it finish," I said. "I'll open us a gate, and-"

I glanced at Hakram and Vivienne, lips thinning. No more risks tonight.

"- you and I will go," I told Masego. "Archer too, if we can-"

This time it was someone else who cut in, and before either Adjutant or Vivienne could object too. I was pleased to see Archer striding towards us on the grass, but surprised to see her scarf was already pulled up and her bow strung. She'd been expecting trouble already.

"Cat," she said, "we have a problem."

"I'm aware," I replied, jutting a thumb towards the spell-window. She took a glance, then grimaced.

"Cat," she said, "we have two problems."

Fuck me, I thought. Hadn't this night been enough of a malediction already?

"I'm listening," I said.

"The Gigantes are gone," Archer said. "All of them. I think they went back into Creation."

I felt a moment of blind panic at the notion of Keter getting its hands on Gigantes spellsingers, Gods would even the Ways be safe anymore now that Tariq was dead – but the talons of the crows pricking at my skin drew me out of it. I breathed out.

"Hierophant, is this their work?" I asked.

"No," Masego immediately replied. "This is Trismegistan, Catherine. And I understand why it unsettled me. The elements I found familiar were of my work and Akua Sahelian's."

I blinked.

"The Dead King cribbed from your spellcraft?"

"I suspect," Hierophant softly replied, "that it was the other way around, Catherine. However unknowingly. It is not without reason that the very magic we practice bears the name of Trismegistus."

"Shit," Archer said. "This is *his* spellwork, isn't it? His actual hand weaving the spell, not some intermediary's."

Well, would you look at that. It *had* somehow gotten worse. There really wasn't any time to waste if Neshamah himself was making a play, so I stiffly swept my staff across the air and ripped open a gate down into Hainaut. A howling gale swept ash and smoke towards us and I glanced at Archer and Hierophant.

"You two, with me," I ordered, and went into the storm.

—

The winds slashed at us angrily, bludgeoning us with ash and sharp pieces of gravel.

With the Sisters themselves on my shoulders I could almost call on Night the way I'd been able to before it was ruined, but my body was weak. Aching and too close to collapse. Even with Komena banishing the sensation of exhaustion, I could feel a tingle at the edge of my senses warning me how close to unconsciousness I still teetered. The bubble of stillness I wove around us flicked in and out, becoming harder to maintain the higher up the slopes we went. It was Archer that guided us, pathfinding through the jutting blades of glassy stone with their sharp edges that dug into our boots. She took us through detours that saw the stone protect us from the wind, but even with all our haste it was frustratingly slow going.

I clutched the rope when it came down after Masego had finished climbing, passing mastery of the bubble to Andronike as I concentrated on hoisting myself up. My muscles burned even when Indrani came to stand at the ledge and began to pull me up, grunting with effort, but after an eternity of labour I was over that too-sharp edge and falling on my knees atop the stone. My bad leg was pulsing with agony, but it was dull and distant. The Sisters did not want me distracted. I had left my staff down there, beyond the bubble, but it still stood perfectly still as if untouched by the storm. I extended my hand and moments later it was slapping against my palm, the dried traces of my blood rubbing against my palm as I pulled myself up.

The crows returned to my shoulders, never having strayed far. They seemed wary of leaving us behind, my patronesses burned by what it had cost them to face the Dead King while I slept. Hierophant was standing at the edge of the stillness, black robes in disarray and those long tresses woven with silver trinkets swept to the side. He was looking out into the distance, standing

beneath two great fangs of stone crisscrossing as in the distance the Dead King's magic slowly revolved. Archer had found us the right place, I thought, sending her a thankful look. Decent shelter and a good vantage point, it was exactly what we needed.

I limped to Masego's side, not that he gave a visible sign he'd hear me coming.

"So?" I asked.

There was a tense silence.

"I believe," Hierophant murmured, "that he is opening a Greater Breach."

I screamed out the vilest curses I knew at the sky until my voice went hoarse. Archer came to stand by our side, silent as she warily eyed our surroundings.

"Can you Wrest it?" I asked.

"I have been trying," Hierophant conversationally said, "for fifty heartbeats now,"

His shoulders were trembling, I noticed only then. It was hard to see under the ash-dusted robes. And though he was not grimacing, there was a line to his mouth. Tension. I dared not speak another word, even if he'd not said the distraction would be harmful, instead listening as Komena whispered into my ear. I heard not a word but something greater, and my vision swam until I glimpsed a part of what the goddesses were seeing. Wills at war over the sorcery raging ahead of us, those slowly spinning circles of runes and the sphere within them. Like ink in water, Masego was trying to spread his will through the gargantuan amount of power but it was not enough.

There was too much water.

"His perspective is still too narrow," Andronike whispered into my ear, regretful. "He has not witnessed enough."

It was hard to deny the truth of that when it was before my eyes. Hierophant was failing and would fail. Did we have anything else that might destroy this? Night would not be enough, not when I was falling apart and the enemy's raw strength was so great. Did Archer have an arrow that would – no, that was thinking about this the wrong way. The Intercessor had mocked me, in the Arsenal, asked me where Neshamah's devils and ancient sorceries were. Well, they were here now. Why? More importantly, why now? But I'd already been given the answer to that, I belatedly realized, by an old man that was now a dead one. *He cannot use either*, Tariq Isbili had told me, speaking of devils and demons.

It would represent too steep an increase in strength on his side of the scales.

The Pilgrim had meant in the sense that if the Dead King used devils, then the heroes of the Grand Alliance would in turn get to call in angels as a superior counterstroke. Except we'd struck first, hadn't we? The Grey Pilgrim had died intertwined with the Choir of Mercy calling down his dead star, it was our side that'd broken the seal. *The story's not on our side*, I realized with dread. Even if Masego had proved to have the capacity to Wrest the spell, he still would have failed – the scales were tipped in Neshamah's favour for this to work, he had *earned* it. Fuck. And I couldn't believe it would be only the one gate either, it wasn't the Dead King's way.

"Can you see afar?" I asked Sve Noc. "Look for other gates like this, still forming."

"It will be difficult," Andronike cawed.

"But not impossible," Komena noted.

It would require enough of their attention that I'd be on my own, though, their minds brushing against mine made clear. Wouldn't matter, I decided, power wouldn't get us through this. They seemed inclined to agree, and on my shoulders the weight of them waned. As if much of them had gone elsewhere. The glimpses they had granted me ended too, but Masego had been about to be evicted – diluted into effective nothingness, more accurately, but the practical result was the same – from the spell, his aspect stuttering to a stop. He breathed out raggedly moments afterwards, body shivering. Indrani moved to help him up.

"You'll be fine?" I asked.

"I withdrew before it could be turned against me," Hierophant hoarsely replied, nodding. "But though defeated, I have learned some of his secrets. It was impossible not to, when my will was coursing through his work."

He coughed, as much out of exhaustion as the heavy and ash-laden air.

"It is imperfect," Hierophant croaked out. "Unlike the closed circle that Akua made of Liesse. Not only will Keter's Due spread, it was made *worse*. On purpose, I think."

My stomach dropped.

"How much worse, Masego?" I quietly asked.

The last time the Dead King had opened a Greater Breach, he'd blighted most of the Kingdom of the Dead doing it. It was the

reason the phenomenon was known as Keter's Due in the first place.

"I can't be sure," Masego admitted. "Perhaps as far as the defence line to the south?"

That was, I thought, perhaps nine tenths of Hainaut that he had described. Made into a howling wasteland by the spell ahead of us, those spinning circles whose rotations were beginning to quicken. My bloody hand left the staff and I looked down at it, feeling numb. This was... Tariq had *died* for this, and a blighted Hainaut with a permanent hellgate in the middle was what would be achieved? I grasped for a story that could turn this around, but what was there left? We had spent all our miracles, our strength, our last chances. We had bargained ourselves away until only a remnant's remnant remained, and still it had not been enough. The two of them looked at me, somehow expecting I would turn it around, but to my horror there was nothing.

My bag of tricks was empty.

"I-"

I swallowed. The words tasted like ash in my mouth but I forced them out anyway.

"I can't stop this," I quietly admitted. "I have nothing."

I looked away, afraid of what I might see on their faces at that admission. What I found, instead, was a tall shape standing alone in the winds. Down there, away from our shelter. Troublingly close to the spell. Indrani began to say something but I raised a hand to interrupt her. Was this the Dead King, inhabiting a favoured corpse and giving silent invitation by his presence? Talon sunk into my flesh once more, the Sisters returning from their spirit-journey at last.

"There are two more," Komana said.

"One close, to the west, and one far in the northwest," Andronike said.

The other two southern fronts. Cleves and Twilight's Pass. Neshamah did not just intend to win here: he was going to win everywhere and all at once. Not, not everywhere, I almost immediately corrected. That would have been a mistake, overreaching. Enough of an opening for the Heavens to put their fingers to the scale. He'd not touched the front against the Firstborn, trusting in his crippling of the Night and his ability to triumph in a battle of Evil against Evil.

"Catherine," Indrani said. "It's all right. Your armies are still in the Ways, all we lose is-"

"That's not a corpse," I softly said, sole eye still on the silhouette among the storm.

I glanced at my companions.

"Hierophant, can you shield the both of you?"

"I can," Masego slowly replied.

"Then do it now," I said, and walked over the ledge of our perch.

Magic bloomed behind me even as I fell, Hierophant weaving transparent shields as the ground hurried towards me. I barely drew on Night, instead letting the Crows slow my descent. They were uneasy, but I slipped through the storm and limped my way to the lone figure. It was even taller than I had thought. Almost thirty feet tall, his deep brown skin just as indifferent to the elements as the still-pristine white tunic the Gigantes wore. The giant cared not for my approach, and I saw no other of his kind around us.

"Can you end it?" I asked.

The screams of the storm drowned out my voice, but I trusted I would be heard regardless. The Gigante glanced down at me, his short neck bending unnaturally.

"We cannot," the giant said, voice even.

Hope I'd not quite allowed myself to feel died out.

"So what are you doing here?" I asked.

"I wait," the giant said. "I witness."

"Witness what?" I pressed.

"The end," the Gigante said, "and what will come after. Send away your followers, Queen of Callow. Soon the Young King's circle will close and they cannot withstand what will follow."

The spell was ending soon, then. He was warning me that Keter's Due would kill Archer and Hierophant if they stayed. Masego would know as much, and I suspected he would lead Indrani out whatever I said, but I wove a snake out of Night and sent it towards them bearing an order to retreat just in case. I could have gone and done it myself, but it felt like a mistake. My instincts were screaming at me that if I left, I would miss something important.

"There are other gates," I said.

"We know," the giant replied. "There, too, others will witness."

There was a pause.

"Prepare yourself," the giant said.

The world went still, for a terrible moment, and then the storm exploded outwards. Even with all the Night I could spare holding me down and the guidance of Sve Noc, I still fell down on one knee. The power was blinding, staggering, and I could feel it sink into the earth as well as the air. Whether it lasted for moments or hours I could not tell, my body and mind bitterly arguing what was true and false, but eventually the storm passed. It left behind only a perfect circle of runes hanging in the air, a perfect gate into some distant Hell.

A heartbeat passed, and nothing came out.

"What did you do?" I rasped out.

"It is called," the giant said, "the Riddle of the Lock."

My heartbeat quickened.

"It's a gate," I said. "Are you telling me your mages *locked* it?"

"Our singers are dead," the Gigante said. "I witness only the work they gave their lives for."

My fingers clenched as I remembered that while the Gigantes had sent people into Cleves there had been no bargain for the Pass, that – I stopped. But there *had* been, I realized. Clever Cordelia had spent the goodwill she had won executing the Red Axe a second time to move the Highest Assembly to apologize to the Titanomachy for the Seven Slayings. They'd sent people into the Pass to fortify the Morgentor. If the Gigantes had locked all three gates, perhaps the war was not yet lost.

"We are in their debt," I carefully said.

"Aid was promised," the giant said. "Aid was given."

I nodded.

"And how long will their gift last?" I asked.

"A year, a month and a day," the Gigante said.

In the distance, dawn began to break. The giant glanced at me again.

"I will return home the corpses of my companions," he said. "We will not meet again, Queen of Callow."

"Then take you leave with my thanks," I said, meaning every word. "Your people have given Calernia a chance."

Even if both Cleves and the Pass were blighted by the rituals too, we had been pulled back from the fall to the brink.

"We have given them time," the giant said. "What might yet fill it is in your hands."

And without another word he strode down into the restless ash, leaving me behind as he moved into the shrinking darkness. I stayed standing there for a long time, until even the Sisters left me. Dawn rose, slowly, and with it came shadows. My own found me before too long, her steps soft on the ashen ground. Her gaze followed my own, coming to rest on the Hellgate.

"It is oddly beautiful," Akua Sahelian said, "for such a terrible thing."

I didn't answer. The Severance, I thought, might destroy such a gate. If we were lucky, it might even be able to do it through the locking spell the Gigantes had laid so that we would not have to wait until it ended. If we used it, though, the sword would be spent. Perhaps not materially, but as a story: it would be diluted, no longer the blade fated to kill the King of Death. I went through every Named I knew, every trick and spell and use of Light, and found nothing that could be *relied* on. There were only two Greater Breaches on Calernia, one in the heart of Keter and the other bloomed in the shadow of the Doom of Liesse – but there was no Warlock to divert it, this time, and even that trick had not been a true solution. The gate itself still existed in the heartlands of my kingdom, even if it did not lead into them. It had not remained there for lack of trying otherwise on our part. One after another, the solutions fell away until one remained.

"We need diabolists," I said. "Hundreds of them, thousands."

Enough that every devil that came howling through those gates could be bound and dismissed, that a more permanent solution could be devised.

"There is only one realm in Calernia, Catherine, that is the home to so many of them," Akua said.

There was an expectant shiver in her voice, halfway between fear and desire. Praes. The Dread Empire. The first crucible of my life, the fires where I had been forged. I closed my eyes, letting the rising sun wash over me, and let the decision settle.

I was headed east.

Interlude: Flow

*"If you are to win the most then you must win always,
else you will find a hundred more knives pointed at your*

back for every victory. This is both the promise of imperial greatness and the fate of imperial death."

– Extract from 'The Behaviours of Civil Conduct', by High Lady Mchumba Sahelian

The fighting had broken out at midday and lasted until half a bell before nightfall.

Neither the Magisterium nor General Basilia had wanted to roll the dice by continuing the battle in the dark. Helikeans kataphraktoi harassed the retreating Spears of Stygia as they retreated, loosing arrows in the back of the phalanx, but after the day's losses those were but a drop in the bucket. It wasn't like the phalanx could break, either: the leather collar around the neck of every single slave soldier served as a reminder that the displeasure of their masters would be both swift and final. Magister Andras sent out crossbowmen to chase them away, but like mayflies the famous cataphracts of Helike simply danced away and found somewhere else to sting.

Magister Zoe Ixioni set down her glass of wine, having drunk as deep as she dared given the night still ahead of her. The viewing pavilion that had been raised for the members of the Magisterium that accompanied the Stygian army but would not be involved in the day's fighting – the majority of them – was rather luxurious and privately paid fund, a gesture of thanks from Magister Andras and Magister Kyra after they were appointed to command of the Stygian army. The twins had spent most of their time in the Magisterium as part one of its the lesser parties, the Herons, but they were not fools or unskilled at games of power. They were making the most of the opportunity they'd been given.

"We hold the field," Magister Gorgion murmured, drawing her attention. "Is that not... worrying?"

The young man was prodigiously fat, which Zoe had once noted to run in his family, and though he was now the head of what remained of the Laskaris she had several times regretted bringing him into the fold. Though a steady ally – he was terrified of being assassinated should she withdraw her protection – he was also nervous and hesitant, requiring constant reassurance. Would that it had been his older brother that their mother had left in Stygia, when she went out on campaign. The older Laskaris would have been a more fitting partner than the dregs the White Knight's wrath had left Zoe to work with.

"It does not matter," Magister Zoe quietly said. "This, too, serves our purposes."

The ranks of the Magisterium, by tradition, could never number higher than ninety-nine. In practice actual membership usually fluctuated between seventy and ninety, only every rarely

approaching that limit, but these days their ranks were rather more thinned. The White Knight and the Ashen Priestess had slain over a third of the Magisterium in a single day during Kairos' War, and though replacements had come forward further losses had since been suffered to war and intrigues. Considering those slain by heroes had been the finest war mages of Stygia, and a great majority of the Black Vines party that had effectively ruled since the Carrion Lord's intervention decades ago, the ensuing politics had been... fluid.

As a member in good standing of the Black Vines, Zoe had certainly felt the ground grow unsteady under her feet.

The coalition that'd succeeded at taking the reins and stacking the Courts and appointments had then promptly collapsed in the wake of the disastrous campaign into Procer, leaving as successor an even shakier alliance. The Ivory Tile party had widely been seen as the only rival to the Black Vines, before the last few years of war, but they'd lost too many of their prominent members to either heroes or defections. They'd survived long enough to be the tallest dwarf, however, and to burnish their reputation in this time of danger to Stygia they had allied with the only real military party left in the city: the Herons. Though the lesser of the two partners, the Herons had only been brought into the fold at the price of their leaders, the twins of the Sideris, being named commanders of all Stygian armies in the coming campaign.

Already there was talk of formalizing the alliance, of merging into a single greater party, and in Zoe's opinion there was sense in it. The Herons typically advocated that Magisters should train as generals instead of simply leaving such duties to slaves, while the Ivory Tile was the champion of the politics of Haides the Elder – that balance in the League must be maintained, at the price of war if necessary. There was compatibility in ideals, even in the long view, which made such a merging possible. And after the leaders of the Herons had today scored a draw against General Basilia, perhaps the finest commander to come out of the Free Cities this generation, they would now have the prestige to take such a step without simply being gobbled up by the Ivory Tiles.

It was near enough to decided who the rulers of Stygia would be in the coming decade, bar disaster. Magister Zoe Ixioni watched the corners of the pavilion, where other magisters were speaking to each other in low murmurs, and smiled at nervous young Gorgion.

"Aretha the Raven, who twice defeated a Helikean field army using mostly sailors and whores, once said that in the Free Cities a general has more to fear from victory than defeat," Zoe softly said. "Commit the words to memory, Magister Gorgion."

She rose to her feet gracefully and took her leave from the young man, refusing the serving slave that came to offer her a full glass of wine and instead leaving the pavilion entirely. There was another tent, close by, where one could relieve themselves in privacy and relative comfort. Zoe began to head there but slowed her steps as soon as she was out of sight and then stopped. Before long, the woman she'd been waiting for arrived. Magister Phryne's gaunt face was said to have been made this way by the strange magics she delighted in using, for she had once been a great beauty. Whatever the truth of that, Zoe had always found her appearance unsettling. Her politics, though, were almost painfully straightforward.

"The Pale Chariot will lend its support," Magister Phryne said, with remarkable bluntness.

Zoe nodded. She'd expected as much the moment it became clear that the Herons were headed for positions of influence. The Pale Chariot as a party boasted only a half dozen reclusive mages whose personal cause was the safeguarding and improvement of magical knowledge in Stygia, so they tended to be left outside of political calculations. Which meant relatively few people bothered to notice that the only appointments they every sought outside the Court of Arcane was a single seat in the Court of Trades, which they always fought hard for. It was meant, Zoe Ixioni had bothered to notice, to safeguard their common interests in the steelworking industries whose profits happened to pay for all these costly experiments they liked to indulge in.

A detail of little import, unless you also knew that the leading Herons had strong investments in the very same trade and would not hesitate a moment to use their newfound prominence to stack the Court of Trades and award themselves all those lucrative contracts currently funding the Pale Chariot coffers.

"For which you have our gratitude," Magister Zoe said. "The Keepers?"

"You have ours," Magister Phryne said. "Amyntor Eliade is not affiliated with us."

No, Zoe thought, *but he does happen to be my cousin*. The magister offered a demure smile and nothing else, for over a decade of diplomacy had schooled her well in keeping her thoughts hidden.

All that was left, now, was to take the plunge.

—

Merchant Prince Mauricius did not have an office, not in the sense his predecessor did.

Though the Princely Palace was his since he had been elected to the ancient and respectable office he now held, the old merchant had bought enough servants on those grounds to know it was as a leaking sieve. Perhaps he would see to mending that, should the mood ever take him, but until then he saw absolutely no need to keep any private papers and affairs out of his manse. Instead, when he was not attending sessions of the Forty-Stole Court or giving audience in the palace he preferred to retreat to his favorite establishment – Sub Rosa, tucked away near the Irenian Plaza at the heart of power in the City of Bought and Sold. There the merchant prince sipped at his Yan Tei rice wine, imported from across the sea and served warm.

A fine delicacy, he decided, and an interesting experience. The latter was perhaps more important, to a man of his advanced age. Novelty often interested him more than simple luxuries. What point was there in being one of the wealthiest men alive, if he did not use that wealth to experience everything under the sun? This particular evening, however it was not simply for the service he had come to Sub Rosa. The obsessive secrecy of the establishment was what he had sought it out for, not the foreign drink, for the diplomats he was to meet were not of the sort that it was diplomatic to entertain these days. The Tower had few allies left, and if Mauricius was reading the currents to the south correctly it was soon to have even fewer.

When the servants finally ushered in two unremarkable young men, of dark hair and simple clothing, the merchant prince cocked an eyebrow.

“That is an impressive glamour,” Mauricius greeted them.

He could almost see something around the edges giving it away, though, and held back a frown. He had begun to see much too well for a man his age, even one who had access to some of the finest enhancing rituals on Calernia. He was not certain whether or not to be pleased by the implication of that.

“Your compliment does us honour, Your Grace,” a pleasant speaking voice replied. “This one humbly accepts the praise on behalf of his mistress.”

The glamour fell, revealing a young man – though in a Praesi with golden eyes, as this one was, that semblance meant little – in fine red silks, dark of skin and finely formed. A Wasteland aristocrat, unlike the formal ambassador of the Tower in the city, and Dread Empress Malicia’s personal envoy. The other figure remained cloaked and hooded, standing still as the envoy slid into the seat on the other side of the table. The young man had not waited for permission, Mauricius noted, for all that he was using that obsequious Praesi formal diplomatic language.

“You forget your courtesies,” the Merchant Prince mildly said.

"This one was wary of waiting, Your Grace," the envoy pleasantly smiled. "For this one's mistress has grown uneasy of... long waits, in beautiful Mercantis."

It was said that the Dread Empress of Praes knew black arts that let her make a puppet of a body far away, Mauricius knew. There were a hundred rumours of the like about every one of the madmen who claimed the Tower, of course, but this one had been repeated across enough years that it had the ring of truth. Was one such body, then, under the cloak?

"Pull down your hood," Mauricius bluntly ordered.

The stranger obeyed, but it was not some dark-skinned homunculus that the Merchant Prince was gazing upon. It was, he found with a shiver, his own face. Immediately he reached for the rune carved onto the side of the table, which would-

"Freeze."

Mauricius froze. The face of the insolent youth with golden eyes was as a blank mask.

"I dislike handling such matters personally," Dread Empress Malicia calmly said. "But the free rein you have given the band of Named in the city forces my hand. I congratulate you for that much, Mauricius."

The Merchant Prince fought, strained to break the spell.

"A Name?" the Dread Empress said, sounding surprised. "Or a claim, at least. Either way, it means that **Ruling** you is unfeasible in the long term. Which leaves me with only the less civilized path to take."

Mauricius tried to scream as the thing wearing his face eagerly came forward, and even let out a small hiss when it lunged forward with a lamprey-like mouth and tore out a chunk of his throat.

"I do apologize," Dread Empress Malicia conversationally said, "but my diabolists assure me that you must be devoured whilst living for the surface memories to be absorbed and the shape to become permanents. I would have had you poisoned beforehand otherwise, Mauricius."

Pain, Gods the *pain*.

"Farewell, Merchant Prince," the Dread Empress of Praes said. "May you choose your enemies more wisely in your next life."

—

When the Magisterium appointed generals, by ancient custom these hallowed individuals were bestowed with a whip.

The reason why was simple: by law, no freeborn Stygian could serve as a soldier. To hold a military command was to rule over slaves, for which the proper tool was not sword or spear but the simple whip. Magister Zoe Ixioni has served as a diplomatic envoy for the Magisterium for over a decade and served on the Court of Manners for two consecutive terms as the formal representative to League councils – which while without practical power, was a very prestigious position – so she was quite aware of how the rest of the Free Cities thought of Stygian armies. *The finest soldiers that were ever badly led*, Theodosius the Unconquered had famously called them.

It was true that the Magisterium tended to choose its appointed generals for their skill in magic or intrigue rather than more straightforward military skills, which the oldest of the slave-officers of the phalanx were expected to be able to discharge on behalf of their masters. By association, interest in military matters was seen as either eccentric or outright distasteful. It was slave-work not fit for freeborn Stygians, much less members of the Magisterium. It was one of the reasons why the Herons had been a minor party, never swelling beyond nine sitters in Zoe's lifetime. Now Andras and Kyra Sideris, the same twins leading the party that had lingered in irrelevance for decades, were being welcome into the camp to raucous cheers.

Giving away all their weapons save the whips to serving slaves with great ceremony the twins took off their helmets and let the glorious black locks whip free. They were a handsome pair, nearing middle-age but still in the prime of their life and wearing their armour with an ease that hinted at the truth of the old stories saying they'd spent a few years in Proceran fantassin companies during the Great War. The Spears of Stygia that had fought and bled during the day were not granted the same welcome, simply allowed to file in through side gates so the wounded might be tended to and the irreparably crippled discreetly poisoned.

Zoe left the Sideris twins basking in their glory, instead considering the nature of what some Atalantian philosopher-priest had named the 'dilemma of the sword'. If authority came from the sword, then who could rule save soldiers? Like most claims out of Atalante, it was empty air when the priests claimed to have thought up the question: it had been at the heart of Stygia for centuries, a millennium almost. In the days after the fall of the great empire of Aenos Basileon, it was the eldest daughter of Aenia that had first risen to prominence. Ancient Stygia, under the patronage of the great cranes Retribution and Redress. The ruling polemarchs raised a great standing army and crushed the haphazard militias of their neighbours, forcing them to pay

tribute, and for a time the Free Cities had been in Stygia's palm.

Until the army deposed a ruling polemarch and installed in her place a popular officer instead.

The aftermaths of the coup, which ultimately failed, broke the back of the Stygian Empire. Delos and Atalante regained their independence, the tribute system collapsed and it was made law that never again would a freeborn Stygian serve as a soldier. Slaves, owned by the council of leading sorcerer-nobles that had succeeded the polemarchs, would be the city's only warriors. Much time and thought was spent on how these Spears of Stygia would be kept under control, the methods crafted being wide and varied, but the most important of them was the collars. Enchanted leather bands that every slave-soldier would wear around their neck, which were linked to two greater artefacts: the Leashes. Through the Leashes, sorcerers could choke or kill a single soldier or a thousand with but a word.

This had solved the dilemma of the sword, some argued, but in truth it had simply moved around the pieces. It was barely a century before the first general tried to use the Leashes and command of the Spears of Stygia to take over the city by force, only stopped when the Magisterium instead choked every single soldiers in their own army to death by spell. Chastened and wary, the Magisterium ruled that no appointed general would ever be allowed to hold the greater artifacts and created the position of Keepers of the Leashes. Two Magisters, never of the same party or kin by three degrees of the appointed general, would be charged by the Court of Honours to serve as guardians and wielders of the single most important artefacts in Stygia.

Over the years additional precautions and checks had been added to the nature of the position of Keepers, but the institution had largely functioned as intended.

"It is madness, you know."

Zoe glanced at the man at her side, eyes lingering on the noble lines of his face. Amyntor Eliade was a well-formed man, for all that his family had been disgraced when his eldest sister, a recently seated magister, had attempted to abolish slavery and destroy the Leashes. Nephele Eliade had so despised chains, it was said, that the Gods Above had granted her a Name for it. Zoe, who had once counted her as a friend as well as a cousin, knew better than to believe it simple hearsay. That bout of futility had destroyed Amyntor's chances at amounting to anything in this lifetime, but Zoe's cousin had decided to redeem the family name for future generations by seeking an appointment as one of the Keepers. He would, he had told the Magisterium in a passionate speech, dedicate his life to preserving what his sister had sought to destroy.

"The world has gone mad," Zoe replied. "We do what we must to weather the storm."

"It will threaten the very foundations of Stygia," Amyntor warned. "What is it that has so moved you to act, Zoe? You have always been cautious. It cannot be the would-be Tyrant, we have known hundreds, or even the alliance with the Tower – your own Black Vines were ardent partisans of it for decades."

Magister Zoe Ixioni thought of that stately hall where the First Prince of Procer had entertained the greats from all over Calernia, where powers had sparred and found victory or loss. She thought of what had followed in the wake of those days, the Peace of Salia with its Truce and Terms. *The world is changing*, she thought. There would be no returning to the old ways after this, no matter what some of her colleagues might delude themselves into believing.

"The tide rises, cousin," Zoe murmured. "We may either rise with it or drown."

And Zoe Ixioni had not spent decades climbing her way to power so that she could see it all collapse over her head. Amyntor sighed.

"So be it," he said. "I expect Nephele would have smiled of it, if nothing else."

Zoe was less certain, as Nephele Eliade had been surprisingly farsighted for all her moral naivete, but she knew better than to voice the thought. She parted from her cousin, meeting Magister Phryne's eyes as she passed the other woman and receiving a nod. It was done, then. Magister Zoe passed through the crowd of servants and magisters, both parting for her, and was received with wary eyes by the Sideris twins. They had come down from their great war chariot, but both lingered near it. The prestige of the gilded thing was impressive to those easily impressed, which these days was too many of the Magisterium.

"Magister Ixioni," Kyra Sideris greeted her, tone friendly in a way her eyes were not. "Do you come to offer congratulations?"

"I do," Zoe said. "Your conduct of the battle was exemplary. All of Stygia is in your debt."

Surprise from both twins, and the wariness thickened.

"You overpraise us," Andras Sideris carefully said.

"If so, that is fortunate," Magister Zoe replied, "for you are now both relieved from command."

There was a heartbeat of surprise, then Kyra began to laugh. Her brother did not, eyes darkening.

"Such a dismissal would require a vote of the Magisterium," Andras began, then froze.

All around them the Spears of Stygia began to stream in. Armed and ready, pushing the surprised magisters that had not been part of the conspiracy away from the edges of the forming circle.

"This is treason," Kyra hissed, and she raised her whip.

The enchantments laid on it found no purchase on the collars binding the slave-soldiers, for the sorcery of both Leashes had already been used to sever the control of all lesser artefacts in the camp on the slaves.

"Surrender," Zoe gently said. "While you still can."

"We are *winning*, Ixioni," Magister Andras urgently pressed. "Even now the Helikeans will be considering terms-"

"Terms have already been reached with General Basilia," the diplomat said. "We will, tomorrow, offer our formal surrender and submission in exchange for which we will be allowed to rule Stygia largely as we wish."

Some small cities taken by Nicae would be returned as well, which would serve as a useful sweetener for the people when they returned home.

"That treaty will be worth nothing, when Basilia next grows hungry," Andras scorned.

"It will be guaranteed by Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer," Zoe Ixioni smiled.

The utter startlement on their faces was a pleasure to behold. The Spears began to arrest members of the Ivory Tile and the Herons, the few magisters who'd sat the fence of the coup – for this was very much a coup – looking on nervously.

"You lie," Kyra Sideris accused. "She refused the Magisterium when we reached out, what could you possibly offer that would be worth her while?"

"The Magisterium," Zoe said, "will formally abolish slavery."

In name, at least. There would be no more slaves, but there would be a great many indentured servants – it would be easy enough to simply pay slaves less than their upkeep required and let that debt trickle down to their children as it did in the laws of Mercantis. It would maintain the old practices with a deniable veneer, not unlike the practices of Ashur. If there were some troubles, well, it would not be difficult to pass laws through the Court of Order that stripped debtors the rights reserved for

free citizens of Stygia and further tilt the advantage away from the freed slaves.

"You'll die for this, Ixioni," Kyra Sideris raged, fingers tight around the whip. "I'll have my revenge, I swear it."

Magister Zoe considered that for a moment, then nodded and walked away.

"Kill them both," Zoe ordered a slave-officer as she passed him.

She did not stay to see it unfold, for she had a formal letter of surrender to draft.

—

It was as the White Knight had suspected: the Merry Balladeer's song did not simply reach ears, it reached souls directly.

In other circumstances that would have been a mere interesting fact, but Antigone had been taught the 'ways-of-seeing-the-world' — there was no word in any language knew that accurately translated the word in the tongue of the Gigantes — and that meant she could follow the resonance. The Balladeer's song, a cheerful ditty from Salamans about a priest and the three goats outsmarting him, marked out every ensouled undead in hearing range for the Witch of the Woods to smash without needing line of sight. Two Revenants died before they even realized what was happening and with every Bind in a range of a mile crushed to dust the lesser dead were nothing more than a witless horde.

They had struck hard and struck fast, but there came a time where the dice had to be rolled anyhow. Only Antigone had the strength to destroy the bridge the dead were raising, but it would take her time to perform such a great working. That meant it was time for blades to talk. They found a hill with a single narrow path up and Hanno, tired of the elaborate schemes that seemed to plague the world, instead made it all simple: he and Rafaella held the path, the Stalwart Apostle saw to healing and the Balladeer sang. The White Knight raised his sword and shield, his missing fingers itching at the stumps, and let death come knocking as Antigone's spell swelled behind him.

It was the simplest kind of fight there could be: the dead came and they were funnelled up the path. And they kept coming, corpse after corpse. Revenants, eventually, but paltry things compared to the Scourges, and Hanno's sword bit deep. The Valiant Champion tossed away the born that tried them, crawling up the slope, and even as a great wyrm followed by flock of buzzards came down screaming on them the sorcery of the Witch of the Woods was unleashed. Hanno felt the Light coming, swift and clean in a way it had not been in too long, and even as in the distance a

pulsing black sphere spun and began to swallow up the half-finished bridge he climbed the wyrm.

It ended with his sword going through the skull as Rafaella dragged an entire flock of buzzards into her domain, emerging bloodied and wounded but victorious even as Hanno crawled up the broken remains of the wyrm and came to stand atop the skull where his sword was still stuck up to the hilt. The Valiant Champion climbed up to his side, still bleeding even after the finest healing of the Stalwart Apostle. Some of the wounds would scar, not that Rafaella was likely to mind. The two of them stood together and watched hundreds of pounds of stones being sucked in by Antigone's great spell, ripping to pieces a great bridge of stone that must have been the better part of a mile long.

"We will have to sweep the other bank," the White Knight said. "Else they will be able to simply resume the work."

"Tomorrow," Rafaella grunted. "We fought good, but tired now. No wine here, very dread."

"Dreadful," Hanno absent-mindedly corrected.

"Not full," Rafaella reproached. "This the problem, Hanno."

He chuckled, the smile staying with him. It was an old game they were playing, but one he regarded fondly. The Valiant Champion was the sole survivor of the band he had led to defeat in the Free Cities, perhaps his oldest friend in the world after Antigone herself.

"Let's see to the others," he finally said. "We can retreat into Twilight afterwards, when-"

He froze, something flickering at the edge of his vision, and turned.

In the distance, far to the south where Hainaut lay, the night sky lit up with falling stars.

Epilogue

"And so Maleficent the Second said: 'If I must burn half the realm to save the rest, then kneel before the empress of ashes.'"

– Extract from the Scroll of Restoration, fortieth of the Secret Histories of Praes

The Vogue Archive did not sleep and tonight neither could Cordelia Hasenbach.

Numbly, she walked down the mostly empty hall past the great tables bearing maps of the realm she ruled and the smaller bureaus – where, at hours other than the middle of the night, some of the finest minds in Procer tended to its regions. There were a few mages of the Order of the Red Lion tucked away in corners, having retreated after greeting her and now again simply waiting to be of use, but aside from them the oft-crowded hall was quiet. Fewer than a dozen men and women were within it, sometimes reading through the odd reports that had come in the night but more often tidying up the numerous scrolls and reports that'd poured in during the day.

Cordelia made for the back of the hall, the raised dais where her handpicked analysts were charged with sifting through a sea of ink and parchment so that they might find the catastrophes on the Principate's horizon in time for them to be averted. The First Prince had chosen five such individuals, but at this hour there was only one awake and present: a woman of an age difficult to parse, rather dowdy in appearance and of generally unremarkable looks. The sole eye-catching part of the Forgetful Librarian's appearance was her oddly beautiful eyelashes, as if they had been borrowed from a more striking woman and set on this one's face.

She looked, Cordelia had come to realize, rather like the manifest ideal of someone's reclusive, scholarly aunt. It was an appearance that would invite dismissal from many, hiding the sharp mind and utter lack of morals of the Damned. The Librarian was an exceptionally talented woman as both a scholar and an advisor, the First Prince had learned, but she was best used as part of a larger council that would temper the ruthless pragmatism of the solutions she tended to propose. The other woman did not rise as Cordelia approached, remaining engrossed in a book as she cradled a steaming cup of chamomile.

It was a small slight the Damned liked to give, one of the little games she seemed unable to stop herself from playing even when there was no conceivable benefit for her to gain, but it had remained an irritant. Usually the First Prince took the time to consider whether a threshold had been reached where the other Proceran needed to be reminded of the hierarchy between them, but not tonight. The disrespect slid off her like water off a duck's back. It seemed such a small, petty thing to eve spare thought for after the news she had received.

The First Prince of Procer instead slid into one of the seats she'd had brought here, exemplars of comfort given the long hours they would be used for, and leaned back. She closed her eyes, wondering if the Heavens would take pity on her and let her fall asleep instead of remaining like... this. Numb and exhausted, feeling as if she was somehow too tired to sleep. There was a muted clap as the Forgetful Librarian closed her book – though not before placing a bookmark, the parts of Cordelia that never

rested noted, which was interesting given that most Chosen and Damned seemed to have enhanced memory – and set it down, sipping with uncouth loudness at her chamomile.

The Librarian was Alamans and of good birth, meaning she was being unpleasant very much on purpose.

“Long night?” the Damned idly asked.

Cordelia did not answer for a very long time, yet she did not hear the book creak open.

“I have been told,” the First Prince finally said, “that no less than three Hellgates were opened across the breadth of Procer.”

And that was not why she grieved, for sorrow was a nation’s due but grief could only ever be personal, but it was an answer of enough gravity that it would obscure what was truly moving her. The Forgetful Librarian breathed in sharply but did not answer. Cordelia opened her eyes, finding herself being closely studied.

“All three were temporarily sealed,” she continued, “though at the cost of the lives of every Gigantes that came to our aid.”

The villainess hesitated, for though she was not a moral woman neither was she the manner of monster that bargained with devils for the lives of thousands.

“And Keter’s Due?” the Librarian asked.

In proper Proceran scholarship the phenomenon was known instead as ‘the desolation’, but since the Arsenal had begun to train wizards the Praesi terminology had seeped through. It could not be denied that Proceran sorcery had a rather religious turn to it, and as Cordelia understood it the ‘desolation’ was considered to be as much theological in nature as it was magical – a punishment by Above for the ruinous overreach of mortals. *What disgusting idea*, the Lycaonese thought. To punish thousands for the crimes of one, who would not even be moved by the sight of such cruelty regardless. The very definition of pointless suffering. No, Cordelia would take no issue with the use of ‘Keter’s Due’ at all.

“There are reports from both the Hierophant and the Grave Binder that suggest the effects of the Due were purposefully worsened,” the First Prince evenly said. “In each case, most of the surrounding region was blighted.”

The curse had flooded outwards. To the north the losses were acceptable, for Twilight’s Pass had already been bare rock while the swaths of western Hannover and southern Rhenia that had been lost had been poor farmlands. In the case of Hainaut, where the blight was said to have spread down to a natural fortress named

Lauzon's Hollow, the loss was one still to be felt: those lands had been in the hands of Keter for most of the war. In Cleves, however? The Hellgate had been opened at the fortress of Trifelin, where Rozala Malanza had won a great battle mere weeks before, and the Due slain a few thousand soldiers out in the open where there had been too few wards. That had been the least of the losses there in truth.

The blight had also swallowed most of the fine lands along the length candle road, snuffing out the principality's breadbasket.

That meant that Cleves would have to be fed by southern principalities, which were already buckling under the strain and rebellious besides. It meant dozens of thousands of refugees forced to flee south into lands grown increasingly hostile to them. It means that Procer would have to either beg for parts of the harvest of the Kingdom of Callow which it could not afford to buy – not with Merchant Prince Mauricius having clearly laid out there would be no more loans until some unacceptable conditions were met – or there would be starvation in the heartlands of the Principate. Hannover was ash and ruin, ruled by the dead. Of her own Rhenia no lands save the city-fortress itself remained, her own people huddling in the dark beyond those impassable defences while death roamed the countryside. Now Cleves and Hainaut as well were a ruin.

The armies that had been supposed to turn the war around, to push the dead back into the lakes, had delivered instead one of the bloodiest stalemates in the history of Calernia. And Cordelia's own uncle had died in some ill-fated last charge without the break between them ever having been mended, nothing but harsh words left to part on. She forced herself to breathe slowly and steadily, else she knew she would tear up. There were too many people looking. There were *always* too many people looking, and she could not afford to show weakness after having forced the hands of the Highest Assembly the way she had.

"Was Hainaut a defeat, then?" the Librarian quietly asked.

Cordelia Hasenbach allowed herself a bitter smile.

"The Black Queen won the field, though the field was but a smoking ruin and many died," the First Prince replied. "Among them the Grey Pilgrim. The White Knight broke the Dead King's great bridge in the north, so the campaign can still be settled in our favour."

She knew better than to name such an outcome a victory, however. Nearly half the Army of Callow was gone, the Lycaonese forces on the front mauled and leaderless and general casualties had been atrocious for everyone save the Levantines. Who had not been spared, either, though in a different way. The Dominion was in uproar, as at least a few hundred of its Blood had died turning

to ash without warning on the evening of the Battle of Hainaut. Cordelia's spies believed that everyone who could have a feasible claim to being an Isbili had died, around the time the Peregrine himself had died and brought down the pilgrim's star on Hainaut.

With the Holy Seljun dead, no legitimate successor in sight and all remaining major nobles up north fighting Keter the resulting chaos already promised to be crippling. Another nail in the Principate's overly burdened coffin, she thought, for the Dominion had been one of the last few nations with which Procer could trade to keep afloat: the coming tide of squabbles and 'honour wars' would strangle those routes soon enough.

"Trouble in Levant," the Forgetful Librarian frowned, tracing the rim of her cup with a finger. "I'm not so sure we can afford that – economically speaking, anyway. We will have to lean on Helike and her dependents to compensate."

"It will not be enough," Cordelia tiredly replied.

General Basilia, who was now quite openly mulling claiming the title of empress after having so long deferred taking up the queenship of Helike, had made great strides forward with precious little outside help. Cordelia herself had served mostly as a diplomatic broker in the matter of settling hostilities with Stygia, and now that Basilia had most of the western Free Cities under her and a sworn peace with Atalante her rise seemed difficult to stop. Luck was even on her side, as word was that Bellerophon had once more declared war on Penthes, belatedly seizing an opportunity to attack their old rival that the People had failed to recognize. It further tipped the balance in General Basilia's favour, though given the fluidity of wars in the League there was no certain outcome. Not that Cordelia expected the war to continue much longer.

Delos was too great a fortress to easily fall, but it would not stand alone against three cities and the priests of Atalante had no yearning to break a holy oath freshly sworn. It might not be that Basilia would hold all of the Free Cities, as the Republic of Bellerophon at least would fight to the death over submission, but it seemed likely that a tributary empire centred on Helike would be emerging from the aftermath of that war. Given that Basilia was friendly to the Grand Alliance and hostile to the Tower as well as eager for trade to resume, this seemed like a saving grace for Procer's ailing coffers. Except, of course, that General Basilia had spent two years ravaging the Free Cities with her wars.

Trading with a broken land not yet recovered from the last civil war that'd ravaged it was not going to be sufficiently profitable in the immediate future, not when the only Free City whose coffers had swelled was Mercantis and it was hoarding the wealth.

In a year, perhaps two, this could be the miracle that Cordelia needed should the nascent empire of Basilia not collapse.

The Principate of Procer did not have a year to spare, much less two.

"Shall I send for the others, then?" the Forgetful Librarian asked. "If there was ever a reason to wake them in the night, this would be it. I have refined my proposal for the invasion of Mercantis as a stopgap solution, besides, so it might be the time for Your Highness to genuinely consider it."

She still believed, it seemed, that there was room to maneuver. That there was still a game afoot.

"One year and twenty-eight days," Cordelia Hasenbach softly said. "That is how long we have before the seals on the Hellgates break."

And what could be done in so little time? Queen Catherine had left one of her foremost generals, Abigail the Fox, to handle matters in Hainaut with the returning White Knight and bluntly informed Cordelia that she saw only one solution: she was headed for east, for Praes. She would be taking the Marshal of Callow and the remains of the Second Army with her, as well as the reassembled First. A few Chosen and Damned as well, as she intended on settling the war for the Tower and returning west with mages in large enough numbers the Hellgates could be handled by Praesi magics. The Black Queen had not pretended that anything Cordelia could say might sway her from that decision, but the part that had truly cut had been the seemingly heartfelt condolences about Uncle Klaus.

It had seemed obscene to Cordelia that the Queen of Callow had spoken more to him than she had, this last year. That she... The First Prince mastered herself, evenly breathing. The east was beyond Cordelia's grasp, it was no longer her trouble. She would see to the west as much as she still could, to her last breath, even though she knew in the deepest of her heart that the outcome was already decided. Procer would fall because it was simply no longer capable of standing. If the war was not won soon it was going to break, and the war would not be won soon. In truth it might be that victory was no longer possible, Cordelia admitted to herself. Or that if it were achieved, the Principate Procer would not live to see that achievement.

And facing that brutal truth was part of her duty, to plan for it. So Cordelia Hasenbach's mind slowly stirred awake from the numbness, considering how any part of Procer might still be saved from the coming onslaught – how its *people* might be saved. And there was a darker duty still, one that she despised but must consider anyway. Should the Enemy triumph, should it all come to the worst of all ends...

"Send for the others," the First Prince of Procer finally said, tone steady. "And for mage of the Red Lions as well, if you please."

The Forgetful Librarian slowly nodded, then rose to her feet to see it done. Cordelia would need to speak with a man she had hoped she would not see again before the war was at an end. Not out of distaste for him, but because of what she had sent him to guard: the ancient corpse that had once lain in the depths of Lake Artoise, and the weapon that had been made of it. For Cordelia was a Hasenbach, in the end.

If it came to it, she would do what she must: better that some of Calernia survive than none at all.

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It was a delicate balance to maintain, to keep a civil war going without ever being at genuine risk of losing it.

Malicia liked to think of it as painting with her own blood, drawing on the famous turn of phrase by Maleficent the Second. Every success in guiding the war according to her design came at the expense of carving away a sliver from the pedestal of her perceived superior position, and should the game be kept going for too long – or defeats not of her own making be inflicted upon her – then she ran the risk of that pedestal truly being toppled. It had not come to pass, of course. The Dread Empress of Praes had begun to prepare for this conflict several months before the first sword was drawn, and she'd had contingencies in place regarding civil war for decades prior.

Agents seeded and left to grow, traitors and assassins and impostors. Bribes and blackmail, debts to call on and more highborn in the palm of her hand than anyone alive might suspect. High Lady Tasia Sahelian had seen through parts of the preparations, in olden days, but now Tasia was dead and Wolof ruled by a young man she had personally seen soulboxed. High Lord Sargon Sahelian was, amusingly enough, one of her most ardent partisans well beyond the influence she could truly exert on him. He had bloodied Wolof taking it from his aunt, so he now craved years under the protection of a greater power to rebuild his domain in peace.

And, for all that Abreha of Aksum – Sepulchral, as she now styled herself – remained breathing, east of the Wasaliti there was no greater power than Dread Empress Malicia. *So long as I do not slip*, Alaya reminded herself, studying the board before her. She'd always enjoyed shatranj, even when she had still been her father's daughter and not a prisoner in a golden gaol. It was a game of logic and sequence, of anticipating the movements of your opponent, which had always appealed to her. Wekesa had enjoyed the occasional game with her when he'd visited Ater, the two of them spending more time playing and gossiping over their common

companions over wine than attending to the matters of state Alaya had claimed the time for.

These days, though, Malicia played mostly against herself. The Dread Empress of Praes considered the lay of the pieces, the disarray of black and white that signaled the tail end of a match closely fought, and slid her last black mage down a diagonal. Soft footsteps told her that Ime had joined her without the need for the empress to look away from the board. This was not her bedchambers, simply a study, but her spymistress was one of the very few people who had access to the enchanted secret passage whose door opened behind her.

"Speak," Malicia said.

"Our people in Procer confirmed that Queen Catherine is headed for Praes," Ime said. "Already orders have been sent to Laure by the Black Queen to prepare the supplies for a campaign in the Wasteland."

Malicia cocked an eyebrow.

"They cannot afford one," the empress said.

The intricacies of the internal politics of the Grand Alliance aside, Alaya was speaking to the plain realities of hard coin. Callow was not flush with gold, having already spent most of the coin it had received for brokering a peace between the dwarves and the drow, and Procer was so beggared these days that it was often resorting to paying in goods rather than gold for the Callowan grain and cattle it so desperately needed. In practice, the Kingdom of Callow was simply not wealthy of enough to afford a war on a second front. It did not have the steel, the gold or the manpower to attempt such an enterprise. That had been part and parcel of Malicia's strategy to contain the Black Queen from the very start: make dealing with the Tower a choice between diplomacy and bankruptcy.

"They're pulling out the First and Second Army from Procer," Ime replied. "As for coin, Duchess Kegan was instructed to borrow from the northern barons if need be."

They'd have wealth tucked aside, Malicia reluctantly admitted in a mental calculation. The lands under the baronies of Harrow and Hedges had been only lightly touched by the Tenth Crusade and their rulers had made a tidy profit selling their goods to a beleaguered south during the reconstruction of Callow after Second Liesse. More than that, they would be willing to lend. The barons were not unaware that their adversarial relationship with Catherine Foundling had barred them from the Callowan halls of power, so they would be eager to get a foot in – particularly if the debt was to be ultimately shouldered by the much more friendly Vivienne Dartwick.

No doubt a few handsome spare sons would be sent along with the coin, bearing hints that a newborn Callowan dynasty could do with an infusion of fresh noble blood. Malicia was not unfamiliar with the tactic, her hand having been sought with varying degrees of aggressiveness over decades. Organising particularly painful deaths for those who dared to insist too much had been one of the few instances in which Malicia had worked closely with the Scribe. Eudokia was no friend of hers, but the other woman had inherited that very Delosi penchant for meticulous punishment of the contemptible.

"Who will hold command?" Malicia asked, eyes still on the board.

She moved a pale knight, venturing deep behind an arrant line of pawns.

"Abigail the Fox has been left in command of the Third Army in Hainaut, so she'd dredging up Marshal Juniper herself," Ime said, tone wary.

The empress was not so affected.

"She is a skilled tactician," Malicia calmly said, "and a general to take seriously, but her reputation is exaggerated. Rozala Malanza would have beaten her decisively in Iserre if the Black Queen had not intervened at the last moment. Marshal Nim should be her match, if it comes to that."

Given a decade perhaps the 'Hellhound' would fully grow into her talents, having been seasoned by the Uncivil Wars, but for now the experience of the commanders that had served since the Conquest was difficult to match for such a young woman. It would tell, particularly in treacherous grounds like those of the Wasteland. Still, Malicia did mourn that such a talent had been stolen away from the Empire. It had been a stroke of terrible luck, that General Istrid would die during Second Liesse and so leave her daughter adrift and her old legion easily led astray. Not the greatest misfortune to come out of that battle by any measure, but a misfortune nonetheless.

"She will be coming personally, Your Majesty," Ime quietly said. "The Black Queen. And she pulled away two of her armies from the war on the dead, against our expectations. She is taking a much harder line than we believed she would."

Her spymistress was not incorrect, Malicia thought as she moved a black tower near the centre of the board. The Dread Empress did not find it entirely surprising that after what the Callowans had quaintly named the 'Night of Knives' their queen would balk at a diplomatic resolution of their disagreements, but she *had* expected that Cordelia Hasenbach would push for such an initiative. The burdens of the war should have rent Procer asunder by now and forced the First Prince to seek terms, even if

behind the Black Queen's back, but out of Salia there was only silence. Scribe had seized the reins of the remaining eyes in Procer, which meant information trickled east only at a glacial pace. Alaya slid a white mage, taking a pawn.

"She cannot afford a battle with either the Tower or Abreha," Malicia said. "The ensuing casualties would make impossible an assault on Keter. It is posturing, Ime."

"She thinks us weak," Ime said.

"Which will make all the stronger an impression on her when it is revealed otherwise," Malicia said. "I have no intention of offering onerous terms to turn on the Dead King, the shock and an amenable bargain will see us through."

The priority would be dismantling the Grand Alliance as continental power. So long as Callow was leveraged to leave it after the war Alaya expected that old rivalries between it and Procer would resume, most likely through competing commercial interests, and it would be child's play to cause incidents at the border between Procer and the Dominion. Her plans had not all gone perfectly, of course. The matters down south had turned against her and she would admit that the Stygian coup had been a complete surprise, but General Basilia's victories brought opportunity with them. Sponsoring an eastern alliance within the Free Cities to rival the western Helikean bloc would check Grand Alliance influence in the region.

Already the Secretariat was willing to privately entertain her envoys, worried that Delos would be gobbled up by the victorious marauding general.

"Or she could try to enthrone another in your place," Ime murmured.

Alaya's fingers tightened around a black knight. Malicia cocked an amused eyebrow.

"He has no armies, little practical support and fewer allies than I have fingers," the Dread Empress of Praes said. "Amadeus has not returned to my side, but he has not raised a rebel flag beyond that unfortunate lapse at the Peace of Salia."

Reconciliation might still be possible, she left implied. And Amadeus was in Praes, that much had been confirmed, but her once Black Knight had not made many visible waves. He had not sought allies within the highborn, reached out to the self-proclaimed Dread Empress Sepulchral or even come out of the woodworks to lead the deserter legions in the Green Stretch. The last in particular was a shame. It would have simplified things a great deal in some ways. Malicia was inclined to believe that Ranger had been an anchor around his neck, this time: for all that she

was a fearsome force of violence, at the moment the half-elf was also being hunted by the Emerald Swords.

So long as she remained his companion, Amadeus could not come into the light without having those ten monsters coming for wherever he dwelled. Alaya released the knight, turning to meet her spymistress' eyes. Ime looked troubled, as she often was these days. She was growing old, for all that rituals still kept the worst ravages of time away, frailer in both body and mind than the bold woman she had been in their youth.

"You have concerns," Malicia said.

"In understand why we cultivated the perception of our weakness," Ime said. "So long as we were a genuine military concern for the Grand Alliance, I agree that we ran certain... risks."

Like Catherine Foundling gating in through the Twilight Ways and beginning to drown cities, driven to hard measures by the fear of the Grand Alliance buckling under a war being fought on two fronts. Much easier for Praes to be beset by civil strife, a threat still but only a distant one. Not urgent, an enemy that outright threatened the survival of Calernia. Not that Malicia herself did not genuinely believe that the Dead King had any real chance of winning, for Evil did not win wars, but then it was not her soldiers dying in droves. She had ensured that the Praesi civil war under her watch was to be largely bloodless, mostly fought through raids and maneuvering.

"Yet that perception may yet come back to haunt us," Ime continued. "She despises us, Malicia. She might refuse to deal with the Tower even if it's the safer path, so long as there is another path at all. Another credible candidate."

Malicia studied her spymistress. It was not assassination being alluded to here, of course. Ime had argued for it in the past but Alaya was still unwilling. Such an attempt would be laughably unlikely to succeed, besides, so long as he had Ranger by his side. Why even consider the option, with that in mind? No, it was a different sort of measure that Ime was arguing for. Alaya looked down at the board and rested a finger atop the black knight she had left behind, thinking for a moment. Sometimes childish dreams had to be let go of, she thought. Even when it was painful. There would be no returning to the way things used to be, and pretending otherwise was embracing the noose.

She tipped over the knight with a flick of her finger, the ebony piece clattering against the board.

"Your advice has merit," Dread Empress Malicia said. "Send for Marshal Nim."

Her spymistress watched her carefully.

"You'll do it, then?"

"Yes," the Dread Empress of Praes said. "I will recognize her as my Black Knight."

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It was a pleasant night out, especially with a bottle of wine and stolen roasted chicken to gnaw on.

The hinterlands of Aksum seemed perpetually doomed to being set aflame, Amadeus of the Green Stretch mused, since a mere few decades after he'd torched them on his way to besieging the city the High Lord of Wolof was now doing the same. Young Sargon was also abducting people to fill up the city that his aunt had mutilated on her way out, however, which Amadeus found an interesting variation on the usual Praesi civil war. It was important to keep those things fresh, he felt, and Gods knew that the Dread Empire had a great deal of practice bleeding itself. The dark-haired man chewed on his second chicken leg thoughtfully, watching the smoke rising in the distance. Another village burned. They ought to get moving soon, he figured, else they would risk running into raiders.

Amadeus wasn't exactly afraid of the outcome that would ensue, but it wouldn't be subtle and that lack was a lot more dangerous than those raiders could ever hope to be.

He wasn't even halfway through the leg when he first glimpsed Hye coming up the path, noticing the splash of red blood on her sleeves when she got closer. Ah, fruitful talks then. She'd always been such a skilled diplomat, if one with a particularly narrow repertoire. He let himself drink in the sight of her for a moment, the long locks framing the high cheekbones and those clever dark brown eyes. Amadeus had seen her in everything but bare skin and moonlight to mail and cloak caked in filth, and even after all these years the faint note of wonder had yet to fade. The love of his life approached, taking a long look at him and narrowing her eyes.

"You ate both legs, you jackass," Hye Su, who some knew as the Ranger, noted.

"So I did," Amadeus, cheerfully replied. "You should have stolen your own chicken, if you wanted the choice cut."

Though he had once been known as some manner of knight, he'd never bothered with chivilary: to add insult to injury, he also tossed the bones of the first leg he'd eaten at her and watched as she easily dodged. Her lips twitched, though.

"I should leave you hanging for this," Hye complained.

"You won't," Amadeus smiled. "You got to kill something, it always puts you in a chatty mood."

"I don't get *chatty*," Hye denied, deeply offended.

"Of course you don't," Amadeus pleasantly smiled.

He had to duck a chicken bone, but it was a victory in every way that mattered. Though huffing while she did, she dropped at his side and the both of them sat back against the tall milestone that some ancient High Lord of Aksum had raised on the hill near the road. Hye naturally helped herself to the rest of the chicken, producing a knife so she could pop the juicy but cooling pieces into her mouth, and the two of them sat closely together under the night sky.

"So I was talking with this fae," Hye said.

"As one does," Amadeus amiably agreed.

"He had this friend that knew a friend," Ranger mused. "And *they'd* heard that the Black Queen, out west, she's headed our way."

"To clarify," he said, "was this helpful rumour shared before or after you started stabbing him?"

"Eh," Hye said. "You know how it is with fairies. There's stabbing and then there's *stabbing*."

Sadly, Amadeus of the Green Stretch did know how it was with fairies. It was only marginally better than dealing with Wasteland highborn, something that had driven him to some fairly infamous bouts of stabbing over the years.

"Shouldn't be a long journey through the Ways," he said. "Two, three months at most."

"Sooner, if Indrani's guiding her," Hye said. "She's always been a natural at pathfinding."

Amadeus hummed, amused at the understated pride in her voice. Though Hye did not visibly play favorites among her pupils, she'd always favoured those who used bows slightly over the rest.

"It is time for us to surface, then," he said. "We need to get the last pieces in place before my own former pupil arrives."

Hye grinned, all teeth and malice, and he felt his heart skip a beat. Even now, after all these years... well, he was not as young as he'd once been, but she did not seem to mind so what did he care? If anything she seemed to like the grey in his hair, which he had not known he was worried about until he felt relieved she

did. It had been some years since Amadeus had last felt insecure, even unknowingly, and he had found it almost refreshing.

"Finally," Ranger said. "I've been enjoying laying low, Amadeus, but sometimes you just need to bite down on something you know?"

"I do," he replied in a murmur. "And this is long overdue."

He looked east, where in the distance waited the gargantuan shape of the Tower jutting out from Ater, and he raised his half-empty bottle of wine in a toast. When was he to settle his accounts, if not the end times?

If the song refused to leave him, then he would *silence* it.